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THE NEW REPUBLIC

A Journal of Politics and the Arts

VOLUME 240 WASHINGTON, OCTOBER 21, 2009 NUMBER 4,870

Let Them Vote

President Obama and his allies in Congress are doing everything they can to rally 60 senators behind health care reform. But, for one red-state senator, even 60 "yes" votes won't do. It has to be 65. "I think anything less than that would challenge its legitimacy," he said in late September. It's a ludicrously high standard for passage—the sort you'd expect from a Republican opponent. But this comment came from Democrat Ben Nelson. And, while Nelson may be an extreme case who revels in opportunities to buck his party, he's not the only conservative Democrat arguing that health care reform—even the scaled-back version moving through the Senate Finance Committee—may be too much, too fast.

Even though the bill, as constructed, would leave millions uninsured and millions more with scant coverage, several of Nelson's Democratic colleagues have talked about weakening the bill even more, by further reducing its funding. They say they're worried about controlling the cost of medical care, and yet, they've eschewed obvious ways to cut costs, such as taking more money from the drug or hospital industries. And they oppose a voluntary public-insurance plan, which is among the most efficient ways of delivering affordable, reliable coverage.

What are their motives? The charitable explanation is that Nelson and his allies are acting out of principles they come by honestly—that they simply can't abide even this modest expansion of government. But sincerity does not guarantee good public policy. And, in this case, their opposition wouldn't seem to serve their constituents well: 12.8 percent of Nelson's Nebraska constituents lack health insurance, as do 17.5 percent of Blanche Lincoln's in Arkansas and 20.2 percent of Mary Landrieu's in Louisiana. Many additional people in those states are "underinsured," meaning their coverage doesn't meet their needs. Because the Senate Finance bill does not offer financial assistance to people making more than three times the poverty line—and because the insurance it guarantees is less protective than what other, more expensive versions of reform would require—many of these people will remain exposed to the severe financial, not to mention medical, risks of inadequate coverage. More generous reform would ameliorate that problem, and few of its beneficiaries would bear the price, since the money to pay for it would likely come from taxes on the rich and on expensive benefit plans.

A less charitable explanation for the obstructionism of red-state Democrats is that they are trying to curry favor with health industry interests that help finance their campaigns. (Nelson has always been a favorite candidate of the health insurance industry, for example.) But there's a political cost to watering down reform: It might produce a bill that voters don't like. A reform crafted to appease the health care industry would extract minimal concessions from it: It would let drugmakers and hospitals get off with minimal sacrifice, even as both stand to gain the business of millions of new customers. Such reforms would do little to tamp down the skyrocketing prices of drugs and hospital stays (and, for that matter, the prices of devices and doctor visits). Insurers would have more leeway to raise their own prices and treat their sicker patients badly. Employers would continue to operate with minimal interference, which would mean fewer guarantees for Americans who get insurance through their jobs. By insisting that reform conforms to the interests of these groups, conservative Democrats can perhaps secure their campaign contributions—but only at the risk of alienating constituents. Lincoln will have Wal-Mart. But will she win her next election?

To be fair, Nelson, Lincoln, and others do have constituencies that express some seriously right-wing views. And, while polls sometimes show that conservatives support reform, voters in these states may well be skeptical. Perhaps what these senators need is a clever way out of their political dilemma—a way to produce change without supporting reform that is perceived as too liberal. Fortunately, the procedures of the Senate allow for just such a convoluted arrangement. Obama and his allies are focused on getting 60 votes because that's what it takes to break a filibuster. But a senator can vote to break a filibuster without voting for the bill being filibustered. Nelson and others can simply support cloture and then vote "no" on the final bill (or merely abstain). As long as Democrats have 50 "yes" votes—and they almost surely do—the bill will pass.

This approach would let an important bill come to a full vote and would allow a simple majority to pass the legislation. It's more democratic than allowing a minority inflated by the over-representation of small states to block the newly elected president's central domestic policy promise. Surely that's enough legitimacy for Nelson—particularly when it's also the right thing to do. ◆

Robert Neubecker

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Contents

October 21, 2009

The Editors 1 **LET THEM VOTE** *Health care reform's last obstacle.*

TRB

Jonathan Chait 4 **POP FICTION**
How to demagogue health care and feel good in the morning.

THE MALL

Noam Scheiber 7 *Geithner and Summers go to tennis camp.*

Jeffrey Rosen 10 *Comcast, the biggest threat to free speech since Nixon.*

Michelle Goldberg 11 *Meet the next Glenn Beck.*

Daniel Altman 14 *How a map can prevent the next financial crisis.*

Bernard-Henri Lévy 17 *A journey into Afghanistan.*

FEATURES

Michelle Cottle 19 **NO EXIT** *The never-ending lunacy of Betsy McCaughey.*

Ganesh Sitaraman 23 **COURSE CORRECTION**
My term at Afghanistan's graduate school of war.

Daniel Jonah Goldhagen 26 **ENDING OUR AGE OF SUFFERING** *A plan to stop genocide.*

BOOKS AND THE ARTS

Stanley Kauffmann 30 **FILMS CHANGE, MORE AND LESS** ***Disgrace*** *on screen; another love triangle.*

Jed Perl 31 **ART THE RESTLESS MEDIUM** *If anything has been true about the art of photography since its inception, it is that photography will not sit still. So why would critics and theorists want to pin it down?*

Lawrence Lessig 37 **ESSAY AGAINST TRANSPARENCY** *New technologies make it possible for government to provide an unprecedented amount of information about itself to the public. What could possibly be wrong with that? Plenty, it turns out. Transparency may lead to all sorts of confusion and mistakes.*

Richard Howard 42 **POEM RECRIMINATIONS OF A FORMER LEFT-HAND MAN**

Robert Alter 44 **BOOKS SCRIPTURE PICTURE** ***The Book of Genesis*** *illustrated by R. Crumb*

William Deresiewicz 48 **BOOKS A GEEK GROWS IN BROOKLYN** ***Chronic City*** *by Jonathan Lethem*

Kurt Olsson 52 **POEM NOBODY'S SONNET**

David Thomson 53 **BOOKS SHORT CUTS** ***Robert Altman: The Oral Biography*** *by Mitchell Zuckoff*

WASHINGTON DIARIST

Leon Wieseltier 56 **THE TREND IN DYING**

Cover illustration by Andrio Abero

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Pop Fiction

How to demagogue health care and feel good in the morning.

JONATHAN CHAIT

On the first day of the Senate Finance Committee's hearings on health care reform, Senator Jon Kyl, a fiery free-market fundamentalist, assailed reform as a "stunning assault on liberty." By day two, he had turned to the more prosaic task of reversing the bill's cuts in the Medicare budget. The elderly, Kyl fretted, "have reason to be worried that portions of this bill could affect their care." Note that neither health care experts nor even the AARP believes the cuts would hurt senior citizens. But Kyl and the Republicans have managed to outflank even the most hard-core pension-rights lobbyists.

One could muster ideological extremism to make the case that the government has no business subsidizing health insurance for people who can't get it. Alternatively, one could make the equally nutty case that Medicare should not lose a single dollar from its budget, however wasteful and inefficient it may be. But no political philosophy on earth could justify both of these fanatical positions at once. Somehow, though, the Republican Party has managed to stake out this absurd territory—Claude Pepper minus the social conscience, Milton Friedman without the small government.

Its total lack of intellectual merit aside, this odd philosophical hybrid offers the GOP maximum demagogic potential. Republicans first began to gain traction on health care during the August recess, when a series of wild rumors (death panels, for one) devoured the agenda. More recently, they have seized upon the specific fears of Medicare recipients that universal health care will come at their expense. The result is a politically potent cocktail of status quo bias, ignorance, and general apprehension.

David Frum, the Bush speechwriter turned conservative apostate, has warned that the GOP's scorched-earth tactics will ultimately make any conservative health care reform impossible. "If we win, we'll trumpet the success as a great triumph for liberty and individualism," he admitted. "Really though it will be a triumph for inertia."

Of course, there's not much fun in conceding that your side is winning over public opinion by exploiting ignorance and fear. It's far more pleasant to imagine that the people have risen up in principled revulsion against statism.

TRB
From Washington

The vanguard of this fantasy movement rests at *The Weekly Standard*. One issue from a few weeks ago featured a cover image glorifying the town-hall protestors. Modeled after Norman Rockwell's famous *Freedom of Speech* painting, it depicted a heroic conservative with a copy of the *Standard* in his pocket. Unlike Rockwell's image, which portrayed the onlookers as fellow citizens holding their tongues in respectful disagreement, the *Standard* cover depicted them as hideous goons armed with brass knuckles. The corresponding editorial, unironically entitled "People Power," explained that the public had righteously stood up against elites in the name of "freedom and responsibility." The editors of *Pravda* would have called this package over-the-top.

Notably absent was any close analysis of the nature of opposition to health care reform, which turns out, upon inspection, not to consist of a glorious pro-capitalist proletarian uprising. The segment of the population most opposed to reform has been the elderly, who benefit from a single-payer system in Medicare. As ABC News polling director Gary Langer explains, "Among seniors, the single strongest independent predictor of opposition to reform overall, and to a public option in particular, is the sense it'll weaken Medicare." The "freedom" here is the freedom to avoid any hint of disturbance in one's government-run health care plan.

There is also the related inconvenience that opposition to health care reform appears to be closely linked to misunderstandings of health care reform. Support for reform rises when poll respondents are read details of Obama's actual plan. And the low point for reform came during August, when public belief in death panels and other misconceptions surged.

Conservatives have reacted to this awkward fact by redoubling the anti-intellectual populism championed (and embodied) by Sarah Palin. One favored technique is to imply that anything believed by a majority of the public—or even a significant minority—must be true. Palin herself defended the fear-mongering over death panels thusly: "Establishment voices dismissed that phrase, but it rang true for many Americans." Well, that settles it.

Wall Street Journal editorial page economics writer Stephen Moore recently cited a poll showing that the average American thinks half of every government dollar is wasted. This result, he gloated, shows why "Americans are so fearful of a government takeover of the health-care system." Of course, no serious estimate would support the idea that anything close to half the budget goes to waste, and Moore makes no attempt to defend it. The notion of a "government takeover" of health care is likewise fictitious.

Taken literally, Moore's observation is true: The fact that Americans believe one absurd fiction does show that they're liable to fall for another. Naturally, however, Moore inferred something else. The new right-wing populism deems the existence of a widespread belief to be sufficient proof of its veracity.

In yet another populist *Standard* editorial, Fred Barnes mocked Obama's claim that health care reform could reduce cost growth while providing universal coverage. The people have rejected this contention because it violates "the laws of addition and subtraction," he huffed, adding, "Does he think we're stupid?"

I don't mean to go all intellectual elite here, but the concept of expanded coverage and slower cost growth does not, in fact, violate the laws of addition and subtraction. Every other advanced country provides universal coverage, with equivalent or often better performance, at dramatically less cost. Earlier this year, a respected study by the Brookings Institution outlined proposals to expand coverage while reducing cost growth. One of the co-authors of that study, Mark McClellan, who served in the Bush administration, has praised a draft of a Senate Finance Committee bill for fulfilling the report's goals.

The short answer to your question, Mr. Barnes, is yes. ◆

ANTHONY RUSSO

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The Mall

Moneyball

Geithner and Summers go to tennis camp.

For the handful of people in charge of saving the U.S. economy, it's been a grueling season. The last eight months have featured endless back-and-forths, tense stalemates, and spirited confrontations. Larry Summers, the president's chief economic adviser, has drawn blood with his lacerating quips. Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner has dropped expletives to signal his frustration. Even their aides have gotten in on the action.

And, in those rare instances when the wonks get a break, they step outside their conference rooms, loosen their ties, and do the same thing all over again. On a tennis court. For years, Summers, Geithner, and a variety of deputies have stared each other down from opposite sides of a three-foot-high net. These tennis relationships have played out on courts from Jackson Hole, Wyoming, to Davos, Switzerland, and on pretty much every flat surface in Washington, D.C. It turns out that tennis is the unofficial sport of the Obama financial team. And, if you want to understand the way its members go at it behind closed doors, it's worth watching them go at it with tightly strung rackets.

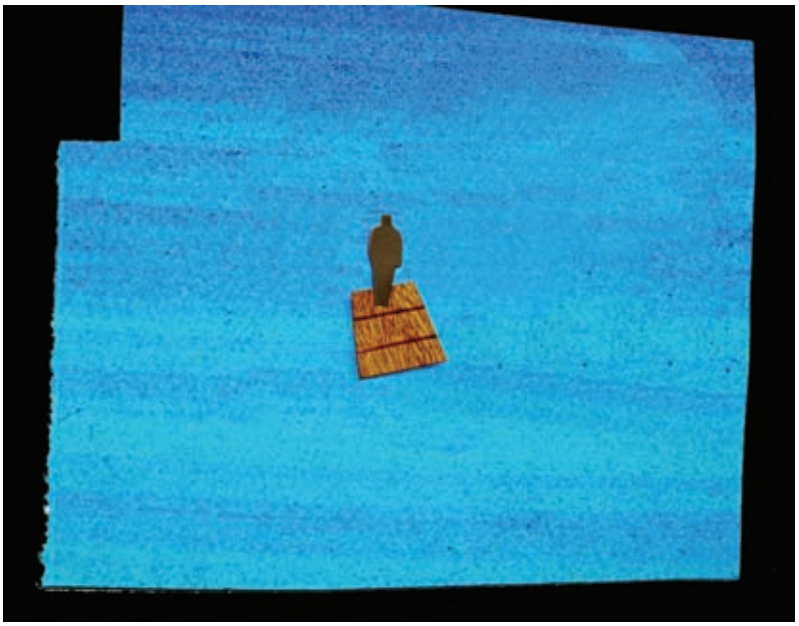
Start with Summers, the famously blunt former president of Harvard. It's not hard to deduce the on-court approach of a man who, as a young professor, favored such expressions as, "Here's why what you're thinking is wrong," and who believes the way to respond to a financial crisis is with overwhelming force. "Basically, he hits the crap out of the ball," says Jon Gruber, an MIT economics professor who began playing with Summers in the late 1980s.

A quick look at Summers suggests diving for drop shots isn't really his game, though opponents say he's deceptively agile. The typical Summers point will start with a cannon-like serve. If the return is weak, the bulky six-footer will cut the ball off and swing for a difficult angle. Each additional shot is more likely than the last to either be out or un-returnable—the shorter the rally the better. As a player, "Larry is very tenacious … like his personality," says Summers's sometime coach, Nick Bollettieri. "I don't think Larry ever smiles." (Adds Bollettieri: "I told Larry if he has enough money, I can still get him to another level.")

It may come as a surprise that the normally understated Geithner—his trademark verbal tic: "I don't know anything about this, but …"—would play a similarly incautious game. But, decked out in tennis shorts, Geithner is wont to let it rip. "He's a little different on the court than Tim Geithner the central banker," says one colleague. "When he isn't playing well, it's because he's going for it and missing, not because he's being too careful." Though nearing 50, Geithner is a natural athlete with a runner's physique. He can materialize at net so quickly it feels like he served from mid-court, and the sight of his five-foot-eight-inch frame almost dares an opponent to lob him. This is generally not advisable, as Geithner has more impressive ups than you expect to find at a G-20 summit. One hallmark of a game with the Treasury secretary is an unusual number of overhead smashes. Geithner was, after all, a Summers protégé.

Since the inauguration, Geithner, Summers, and several other senior economic officials—including Deputy Treasury Secretary Neal Wolin and Assistant Secretary Alan Krueger—have played roughly half-a-dozen doubles matches.

LETTER FROM NEW YORK **LAURIE ROSENWALD**



The loneliness of man, or the fate of David Paterson.

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(Various members of the group rotate in or out on any given day.) The star of these outings is Gene Sperling, a top Geithner aide who, early in the administration, became known as the "undersecretary of everything" for dispatching the many thankless tasks circumstances had thrown his way. As a teenager, Sperling's scrappy baseline play won him a tennis scholarship to the University of Minnesota, where he broke the will of more powerful opponents by chasing down every shot. So far this year, the team with Sperling on it has taken all but a single set.

This is not for any lack of effort. In February, Geithner and Sperling teamed up against Summers and Krueger for a match at Washington's Rock Creek Park Tennis Center. Geithner and Sperling took the first set 6-3 on the strength of their aggressive net play, forcing Summers and Krueger to scramble defensively. There was talk of switching teams once the set ended, but the idea was promptly nixed. "We thought we'd come back," says Krueger. He and Summers proceeded to lose 6-3 all over again.

Most of these tennis ties date back to the 1990s, when the men filled out the upper ranks of the Clinton economic team. But it took the Bush administration to usher in the golden age of Clintonite tennis. Not long after leaving office in 2001, Summers and a Treasury colleague named Lee Sachs spent a long weekend refining their strokes at Bollettieri's world-famous tennis academy in Florida. (Among the illustrious alumni: Andre Agassi, Boris Becker, and Anna Kournikova.) "He and I were making the adjustments to post-government life," Summers recalls. "His father lived down there, and we decided to try it for several days."

✳ *For more on the battle to fix our economy, check out Noam Scheiber's* **THE STASH** *at www.tnr.com*

The trip soon became an annual ritual, with Geithner, Sperling, and several other former colleagues joining in. Each March, the wonks-in-exile would present themselves to the Bollettieri instructors for two days of extensive drilling. In one particularly taxing exercise, the campers would hit a forehand approach, then charge the net to take two volleys before sprinting back to the baseline—one after the other in a whir of circular motion. Imagine the Waltz of the Flowers from *The Nutcracker*; then imagine that the dancers are middle-aged men of roughly average dexterity, and you have the idea.

Well, most of the idea. "Those guys are very, very competitive. Put that in there. Holy shit," says Bollettieri. "There's no friendship on the friggin' court. They want to beat the shit out of everybody." And how do they stack up? "Sperling is better than any of us," Summers says. "I was probably second-best at hitting the ball, but I don't move as well—I'm not as fast. So I would say Geithner or I were probably second-best."

As it happens, ranking the members of Obama's economic team has been a Washington pastime from the get-go—albeit according to influence rather than their ground strokes. Geithner is widely believed to have beaten out his former mentor for his current job, and the press has seized on any sign of discord. "Mutual acquaintances say that the longtime friendship between Mr. Summers and the 47-year-old Mr. Geithner has been strained," *The New York Times* wrote this summer in an exhaustively reported account. The piece was replete with verbs like "forcefully debated," "clashed," and "collided"; a major subplot was a sharp-elbowed struggle over access to the president.

There's something to be said for this storyline. So far this year, Summers has grilled Geithner over his reluctance to nationalize banks. He's prodded Treasury officials to make sure the stress tests were tough enough. (An Easter Sunday meeting on the subject ran five or six hours.) For his part, Geithner reportedly lobbied the president to reappoint Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke—with whom he'd worked closely during the financial crisis—even though Summers's desire for the job was well-known.

Tim Geithner's tennis game depends on athleticism; Larry Summers uses pure force.

David Cowles

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But these tales of intrigue can miss a more subtle dynamic: The members of the economic team are close confidants. They spend evenings at tennis camp discussing children and career moves. They decorate their offices with pictures of each other in tennis garb. It's only every now and then, when they reach a point in a match that will separate winner from loser, that their competitive pride kicks in. Conventional wisdom aside, the men aren't enemies or frenemies or even rivals. They're more like . . . frivals.

Late this summer, at a tennis court in Washington, Geithner teamed up with Sperling to take on Krueger and another colleague. Krueger's team notched a commanding 6-1 win in the first set, then Geithner and Sperling stormed back to a 4-1 lead in the second. That's when the trouble started. "I hurt my hand too bad to keep playing, and Tim really hurt his back," recalls Sperling. But neither wanted to throw in the towel. "We stayed on the court for another thirty minutes negotiating who was going to look weak and use their injury as the excuse to end the match." Finally, they agreed to call it quits so that neither would be crippled. Every frivalry has its limits.

Noam Scheiber

Net Cemetery

Comcast, the biggest threat to free speech since Nixon.

Network neutrality—that's now the official policy of the Obama administration, announced last month by the new chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), Julius Genachowski. It's a development that could be more significant to the future of free speech than any milestone since the Supreme Court's decision in *New York Times* v. *Sullivan* in 1964.

The essence of net neutrality seems simple: Internet service providers should be required to treat all data equally and avoid blocking or delaying any sites or applications. That's an important principle to establish, because there are, unfortunately, cases where it has been violated—cases where network operators have censored speakers who threatened their economic interests. In 2007, for example, AT&T muted the sound during a webcast of a Pearl Jam concert at the very moment Eddie Vedder, the group's lead singer, started criticizing George W. Bush. Verizon, to cite another example, has blocked pro-choice text messages sent by NARAL to its members (who had even requested them). When activists objected to the decision, Verizon said it would block messages from all "issues-oriented" groups, then later apologized for the whole mess, blaming the initial decision on a "dusty internal policy." Nevertheless, it kept the policy in place—reserving the right to censor any content "that, in its discretion, may be seen as controversial or unsavory."

Those examples are bad enough, but there's an even more troubling case that shows how deeply the economic decisions of network operators can restrict free speech. Two years ago, Comcast, America's second-largest high-speed Internet provider, blocked BitTorrent, a popular peer-to-peer file-sharing application that could be used to distribute (among many other things) high-definition TV video that would compete with Comcast's video services. The obstruction was discovered by an amateur singer who wanted to share public domain performances of barbershop quartets with his fellow aficionados. After initially denying that it was blocking BitTorrent, Comcast, which was literally denying access to the King James Bible, claimed that it wasn't blocking the file-sharing application, but merely delaying it to conserve bandwidth as part of "reasonable network management."

The Comcast case is a model for the free-speech battles of the future, where Internet and wireless providers may want to favor certain content providers over others in order to maximize profits at the expense of consumer choice. This problem is especially acute in the United States because of our lack of competition among broadband companies in most markets. In many towns, Comcast (or its regional equivalent) is the only plausible supplier of broadband. This raises the fear that Internet service providers will start striking deals with the likes of Facebook, charging a price for access that Facebook can afford, but making it impossible for other companies to compete.

This kind of discrimination threatens one of the most distinctive features of the Internet: the fact that there is no easy way to discriminate among different kinds of content, just as the electrical grid doesn't ask whether your TV set is made by Sony or Panasonic. But, in recent years, that distinctive feature has been threatened. We now live in a world where the technology for watching what people do with their data packets is sophisticated enough to give a company like Comcast the ability to decide which packets can be shuffled into slower or faster traffic lanes, depending on what its business model dictates. And, in addition to having the technical ability to discriminate, Internet providers now have the legal authority to do so. In the 2005 *Brand X* decision, the Supreme Court ruled that cable broadband providers were not a "telecommunications service" but an "information service," and, therefore, were freer to keep competitors off the network.

You might think that a decision to block the King James Bible would violate the First Amendment, or at least raise important constitutional concerns. But, if Comcast, a private company, is blocking a particular technology, rather than discriminating against particular speakers, there's no state action and no obvious peg for a First Amendment lawsuit. That's why the FCC is crucial to shaping the future of free speech. (Disclosure: I have known Genachowski since we clerked together years ago for a federal judge.) Under the proposed FCC net-neutrality principles, broadband operators like Comcast can't "discriminate against particular Internet content or applications" and will have to be transparent about their network-management practices.

But the most controversial part of Genachowski's proposal is the extension of network-neutrality principles from broadband cable providers, like Comcast, to mobile broadband networks, like AT&T, Verizon, and Sprint—a move that places the FCC in the thick of a whole range of thorny questions, involving both economic discrimination and free speech. At the moment, for example, Apple has struck a deal that makes AT&T the exclusive carrier of the iPhone in the United States. Under the new FCC rules, deals like this may invite legal challenges or regulatory action.

As Timothy Wu of Columbia Law School puts it, a "battle royal [is] underway over what the norms of the wireless world will be—more open, like computers, or closed, like telephones." The FCC will have to decide whether we're moving to a world where you can attach your mobile phone to any wireless network, the same way you hook up your tele-

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phone or computer. Will wireless providers have a duty, if they carry the Internet, to carry the whole thing, or can they pick and choose among companies that pay them more money, in the interest of providing a faster and smoother wireless experience? Apple, for example, has denied blocking Google Voice, the e-mail and phone management tool, but asserts the right to block applications that might threaten traffic management. When Steve Jobs introduced the iPhone, he made clear that it wouldn't be open to all applications, to avoid viruses or huge demands for bandwidth that might threaten the user's Internet experience. Google's Android mobile operating system is based on the opposite model—an open platform for development, accessible to all hardware and software applications. "The big question is what steps the FCC is going to take to ensure that the competition between Google and Apple can continue," says Lawrence Lessig of Harvard Law School. "If the Google model of open competition is more compelling, then closed wireless providers like Apple will have to give way just like the closed Internet providers of the past, like CompuServe."

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There are, of course, huge financial stakes in this competition. Supporters of Genachowski's proposal include not only Google but other companies that want to ensure that their services, such as Amazon and Skype, are as widely available as possible. Opposing net neutrality are, of course, telecoms like AT&T and Verizon Wireless that want to set their own prices and choose which devices run on their networks. The battle will be played out in the courts—where net-neutrality opponents will argue that the FCC has no authority to regulate wireless devices—and in Congress, which could pass a law denying the FCC regulatory authority. "You might say that won't happen, because Obama would veto such a law, but it's not hard to imagine the other side dropping a provision like this into a law Obama can't veto," says Lessig. "Then it becomes Rahm Emanuel's calculation about how much it's worth to fight." In other words, the FCC's embrace of net neutrality isn't the end of this battle over free speech, but merely the opening shot.

Jeffrey Rosen

Truther Consequences

Meet the next Glenn Beck.

Alex Jones is a husky man with short sandy hair, weary eyes, baby cheeks, and the kind of deep, gravelly voice made for horror-movie trailers. And it's horror he has in mind. "Your New World Order will fall!" he screams through a megaphone at the shiny façade of a nondescript office building. "Humanity will defeat you!"

A syndicated radio host, filmmaker, and all-around countercultural icon based in Austin, Texas, Jones has long been one of the country's most significant purveyors of paranoia. His 2007 documentary *Endgame: Blueprint for Global Enslavement*, in which the megaphone scene takes place, purports to reveal a eugenics-obsessed global elite bent on eliminating most of the earth's population and enslaving the rest. Members of a Satanic international network, Jones explains in an ominous voiceover, have been "steering planetary affairs for hundreds of years. Now, in the final stage, they prepare for open world government." And, in a line that would later echo among tea party protesters nationwide, he says, "The answer to 1984 is 1776!"

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Though Jones has always had impassioned fans, until recently, he has remained a quintessentially marginal figure. A leader of the 9/11 Truth movement—he's listed as an executive producer on the final cut of *Loose Change*, a documentary at the movement's center—Jones claims to have uncovered the interconnected plots behind the JFK assassination, water fluoridation, and the recent economic crisis. He has accused the Illuminati of putting its symbols in the Starbucks logo as a taunting show of strength. Ron Paul is a frequent guest on his radio show, and Jones, who also runs a website called RonPaulWarRoom.com, has been a major supporter of the Ron Paul movement. One of his highest-profile guests was Lou Dobbs—Jones calls him one of his "idols"—who appeared on the show in March 2008; the two discussed ostensible plans to merge the United States into a supranational "North American Union" with Mexico and Canada.

But it's really only since Barack Obama's election, when Jones turned the full force of his apocalyptic imagination toward the new president, that his ideas have found purchase in the conservative mainstream. Several Republican officeholders, from state representatives to congressmen, have appeared on his program to trade wild theories about Obama. Glenn Beck has brought his fear-mongering about the New World Order to network television, and an online Fox News show collaborated with him on a joint broadcast.

To be sure, sundry leftists, as well as some Hollywood types, appear on Jones's show, as well. Dennis Kucinich and Noam Chomsky have both been on. It's where actor Charlie Sheen goes to spout his 9/11 Truth theories. But left-wing craziness tends to stay sequestered on the fringes of politics, while the right-wing fringe increasingly *is* the Republican mainstream. According to a recent Public Policy Polling survey, only 37 percent of Republicans believe that Obama was born in the United States. Jones has become politically salient because much of the right is as unhinged as he is.

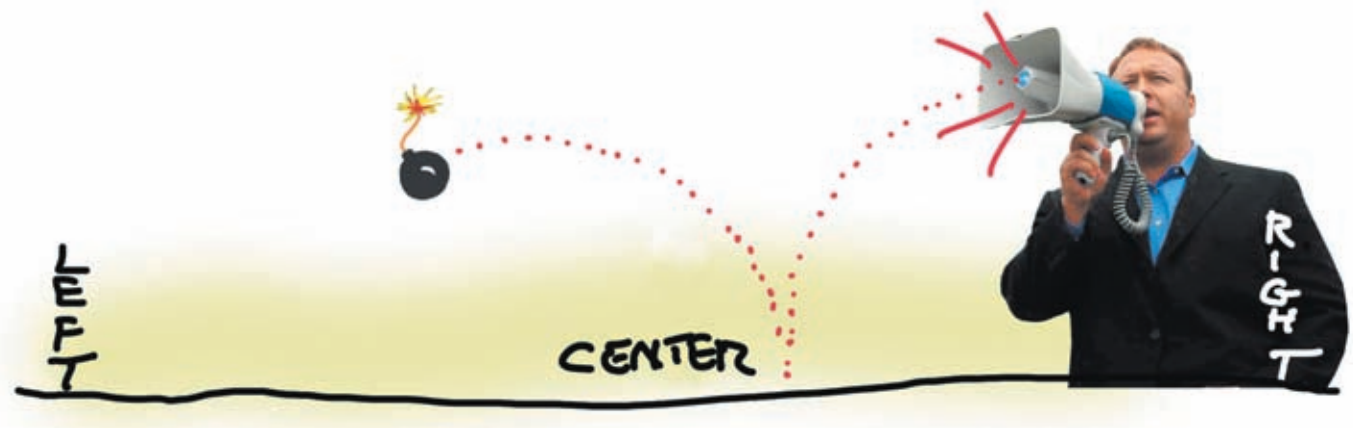
Alex Jones speaks in capital letters, every word ringing with hypnotic urgency. His four-hour weekday radio broadcast, airing online and on some 60 stations nationwide, begins with the *Star Wars* Darth Vader theme, and his opening monologues resound with science-fictional melodrama. "This transmission is *absolutely essential*," began a typical dispatch on September 10, 2009. "All the different pieces of the puzzle are now coming together." He then seesawed between the plausible and the insane: an Israeli attack on Iran may be in the offing; Girl Scouts are being trained as fascist spies; the dollar is falling; the government plans to round up the citizenry and shoot them in the back of the head.

Passionately isolationist and anti-Zionist, his radio program and websites, infowars.com and prisonplanet.com, occupy the shadowy territory where the far right curves around and meets the far left. "People on left-wing blog sites are constantly recommending him," says Chip Berlet, senior analyst at Political Research Associates, a progressive think tank that monitors right-wing movements. Berlet says he often gets e-mails from would-be leftists saying, "You're such an idiot. You should listen to Alex Jones."

Nevertheless, Jones's roots are very much on the far right. He represents an old strain of American conservatism—isolationist, anti-Wall Street, paranoid about elite conspiracies—that last flowered during the John Birch Society's heyday. He began his radio broadcasting career in 1996, in his early twenties, with the Austin-based show "The Final Edition," which promulgated all sorts of black-helicopter theories about Bill Clinton. Steeped in the rhetoric of the militia movement, he's long been a champion of Randy Weaver, the white supremacist whose wife and son were killed in 1992 by federal agents at Ruby Ridge, Idaho. (He's asserted that the people behind Ruby Ridge and Waco were also behind the 1993 World Trade Center bombings—"Clinton's Reichstag.")

Unlike most Clinton-haters, Jones (who didn't respond to interview requests) hated George W. Bush just as much. To him, both Democrats and Republicans are puppets of the same set of rapacious moneymen who have hatched the New World Order conspiracy. So, when the World Trade Center was attacked again in 2001, Jones didn't hesitate to blame the government for what he saw as an atrocity perpetrated by the global elites in their drive to enslave the world's population.

Alex Jones has become the vanguard of Obama-bashing.



Until recently, Jones's search for mainstream allies has been less than fruitful. During the Bush years, when the conservative movement acknowledged Jones at all, it was to mock and revile him. In March 2006, Sean Hannity ridiculed Charlie Sheen for spinning September 11 conspiracy theories on Jones's show. In May 2007, Michelle Malkin argued that Ron Paul's associations

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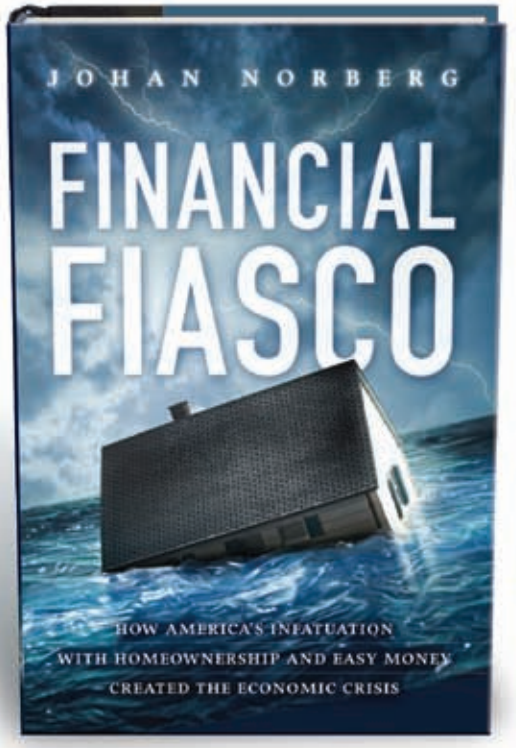
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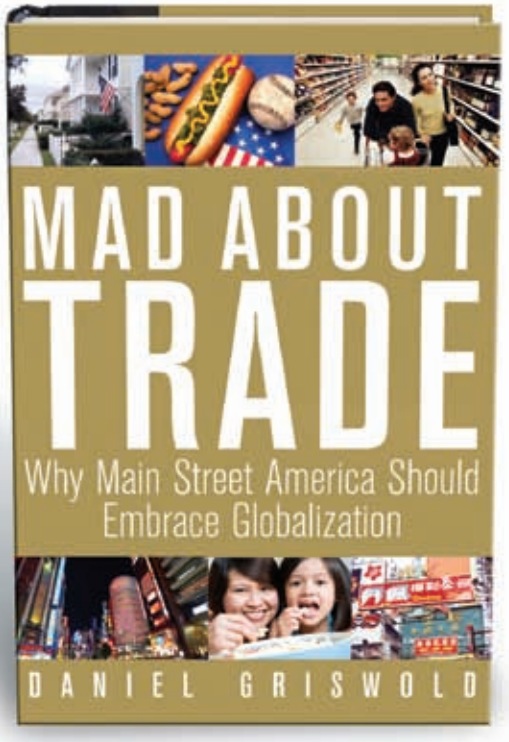

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with Jones and the 9/11 Truth movement should disqualify him from participating in GOP primary debates. Last year, Bill O'Reilly ran outtakes from Jones's interview with fellow Truther Willie Nelson on a segment about "the dumbest things that have been said in the past three months."

But, since Obama's election, the ridicule has died down. On March 15, Jones released a documentary called *The Obama Deception*, which has been widely advertised in conservative media and viewed more than four million times on YouTube. *The Obama Deception* is basically a more detailed version of the dystopian scenario promoted night after night on Beck. Arguing that Obama is the front man for an oligarchy working to create a planetary totalitarian state, it is like *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* stripped of any reference to Jews.

Three days after *The Obama Deception* was released, the online Fox News show "Freedom Watch"—hosted by the network's senior judicial analyst, Andrew Napolitano—did a joint broadcast with Jones. "I am so happy because we're doing something different right now," Napolitano announced at the start of his March 18 program. "We are simulcasting with the one, the only, the great Alex Jones on Alex Jones radio!"

Jones appeared on a split screen with Napolitano. "What are you talking about today?" Napolitano asked him. "Oh, just how hundreds of mainstream news articles a week are saying there is a new world order, a global government, it will be run by the very banks that are collapsing society by design, and we will pay carbon taxes to them," Jones replied. He went on in that vein for a few moments. Then Napolitano said, approvingly, "I appreciate what you're exposing … I must tell you that there was a time when the types of things that you are warning against was not discussed openly and publicly." FoxNews.com has also echoed Jones's warnings that plans to contain swine flu were a pretext to establish martial law—citing his infowars.com as a website that "has been tracking disturbing developments in swine flu preparedness"—and, on September 22, Napolitano appeared on Fox News claiming, in a mix of exaggerations and outright falsehoods, that Massachusetts was on the verge of enacting legislation that would allow police to set up swine-flu quarantines, barge into homes, and snatch unvaccinated children.

Some conservatives have groaned to see the newfound respect Jones is getting. So far, though, no one has paid a price for associating with him. In late July, Republican Congressman Louie Gohmert of Texas appeared on Jones's show to discuss the "nation-ending" potential of Obama's policies and the country's incipient march toward eugenics and fascism. "Did you hear about the White House science czar calling for putting stuff in the water to sterilize us?" Jones asked him. Gohmert allowed that he had not, but he didn't seem particularly surprised. A few minutes later, Jones asked the congressman for his thoughts about "the youth brigades, national compulsory service," that the Democrats had in store. "[T]his stuff has been done before," Gohmert said. "It was done in the 1930s, and that was not the only place it's been done."

"Mao did it," added Jones.

"Well, that's exactly what I was thinking of," replied Gohmert.

Bidding him goodbye, Jones told him, "We're glad you're there fighting, and we're supporting you, sir, and Ron Paul and many others." For Jones, the struggle is a lot less lonely than it used to be.

MICHELLE GOLDBERG

Michelle Goldberg is a senior correspondent for THE AMERICAN PROSPECT. *Her most recent book,* THE MEANS OF REPRODUCTION: SEX, POWER AND THE FUTURE OF THE WORLD, *was published this year by Penguin Press.*

The Network

How a map can prevent the next financial crisis.

THE SHOCK OF the financial meltdown has had congressional committees scrambling for their gavels for the better part of a year. Politicians have been discussing how to make sure that such a near-cataclysm never happens again, and, for the most part, they've focused on the need for new regulation. What's called for, President Obama said in March, is "a financial regulatory mechanism that prevents the kind of systemic risks that have done so much damage over the last several months."

But all the talk of regulation misses a key point: If we don't know which institutions are doing what—if we don't actually *monitor* what we've regulated—then that regulation won't work.

Indeed, signs of regulators' ignorance about what really goes on in the financial markets have been building up for years. Regulators got a warning in 1998, when a little-known hedge fund called Long-Term Capital Management (LTCM) suddenly faced collapse over a series of bad bets on emerging economies' debt. It wouldn't have made news, except that the little fund from Connecticut turned out to be holding 5 percent of the market where financial institutions traded risk with each other. In Washington, the heads of the major financial regulators were frantic.

"When LTCM came close to collapsing in the fall of 1998, that came as a great surprise to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York and to the Board of Governors, even though the counterparties to the contracts of LTCM were the big banks and the big investment banks," says a highly placed member of the Clinton administration.

Yet the authorities didn't learn. Two years later, the Commodity Futures Modernization Act, whose formulation was guided by a report signed by Alan Greenspan and Larry Summers, removed whole categories of so-called "over-the-counter" derivatives from oversight, allowing financial institutions to trade these securities in secret. It didn't take long to see what could happen: In 2001, the Enron debacle showed how a single company could use over-the-counter derivatives to accumulate billions of dollars in debt—unbeknownst to rating agencies and its own shareholders.

And still the laissez-faire attitude of regulators continued, even through the signal event of this crisis, the collapse of Lehman Brothers, when it became clear that the government simply hadn't understood the extent to which letting Lehman fail would tear the tightly knit fabric of the markets. The current crisis "probably was the result of inadequate information with too much financial innovation," says Malcolm Knight, a vice-chairman of Deutsche Bank who led the Bank for International Settlements, the bank of the world's central banks, from 2003 to 2008.

Nonetheless, it's possible that policymakers will *still* continue to miss the point. The solutions that lawmakers and some financial experts are now suggesting—like putting derivatives on markets rather than letting banks and other businesses trade them secretly—do not reveal all of the markets' internal workings, which is why some researchers believe the only way to handle the new economy is with stunningly new ways of collecting data about the global financial firmament, using all-seeing, all-knowing monitoring systems right out of Philip K. Dick's "The Minority Report."

The trouble, however, is that, even as

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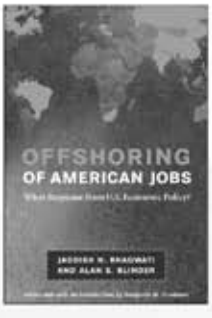

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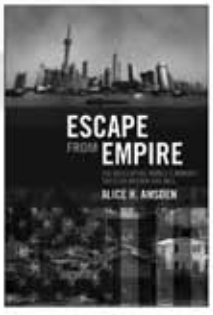

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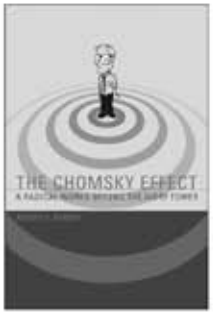

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these researchers race to finish their designs, skepticism is growing among the very industries that would be monitored by these systems, and by the regulators who might use them. A couple of years ago, this opposition might not have been surprising. Now that we know what's at risk, however, it is probably improvident, and possibly dangerous.

The new tools that researchers now envision are meant to foresee crises in financial systems that have become impossibly complicated. "You want to see the build-up to a crash," Markus Brunnermeier, a professor of economics at Princeton, told me in a recent interview. "You want to see it coming on." Brunnermeier has met with Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner on several occasions and has collaborated with researchers at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, the chief implementer of American monetary policy.

Brunnermeier's method for seeing it coming would begin with the data that the Fed already collects. Every quarter, 26 big bank holding companies report a number to the Fed called "value-at-risk," which is an estimate of the maximum money they might lose in the near future with a given probability. But, while banks can calculate their own value-at-risk, they can only guess how stable other banks are—which makes them vulnerable to the ill fortunes of those with whom they share thousands of financial ties.

This is where Brunnermeier had his insight: What if I knew the relationship between one bank's value-at-risk and the value-at-risk of the entire industry? Then I could see how one institution's problem spills over to other institutions, and I could focus on the institutions that seem to be at the source of these problems. The data, collected not only from banks but also from hedge funds and insurance companies, would have immediate implications for the firms' activities. If the data pointed toward a risk pocket during a crisis, the firms would have to stop taking on new risks and stockpile more cash. If groups of firms started to show similar vulnerabilities, computers and human supervisors would see these patterns, ideally before they got out of hand.

But, while Brunnermeier's solution would require collecting new data from thousands of firms, many of which currently report nothing to the Fed, some of his colleagues say his solution—looking at a few key numbers for each institution—does not go far enough. Andrew Lo, a professor and director of the Laboratory for Financial Engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, sees the global financial system as the universe, where each financial center is a galaxy: a collection of stars, planets and other celestial objects held close to each other by their own gravity—in this case, the trades and contracts that tie them together. If you could chart the entire universe and measure all the forces connecting every object inside it, you would have what economists and other scientists call a network map. To Lo, fully understanding what's going on in the markets requires the entire map—not just one value-at-risk number, but every major transaction that connects one entity to another, reported daily.

Another pair of researchers is working along similar lines at Sandia National Laboratories, a government research installation in Albuquerque, New Mexico, concerned primarily with nuclear safety and national security. Until 2001, Robert Glass had been studying highly mathematical topics like how fluid flows through porous materials and the patterns that form in air turbulence. In 2004, he and Walter Beyeler, an expert on the disposal of nuclear waste, turned their modeling skills to two crucial pieces of American infrastructure: the power grid and the payments system that is the backbone of our financial architecture.

Beyeler and Glass started creating network maps of the payments system, and, not by coincidence, they looked a lot like the maps Lo described. "The basic idea is that a small number of the nodes in the network have a very large number of connections, and there's a very large number of nodes in the system that have one or two connections," Beyeler says. In such a map, Lehman would have shown up as a node connected in myriad ways to scores of other nodes, including virtually all of the other big financial institutions. In other words, it would have been a critical hub whose disappearance would cause ripples throughout the system.

Mapping proposals have received at least moral support from Democrats. "I think there is a lot of potential here—in fact, Andrew Lo has been talking to my staff," says Congressman Barney Frank, whose Financial Services Committee is slated to hear testimony on systemic risks in the next couple of weeks. "But we're not going to prescribe that; we're going to empower that. These are specifics that should be decided by the regulator, and not by Congress."

But even the regulators themselves are skeptical. "We're not the National Security Agency [with] total information awareness," says a senior official from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York who insisted on anonymity. "When you start to get to the type of information that would be required for the network maps, I think there would be a real reticence on the parts of the sovereigns and the institutions to provide that information."

So far, the financial industry's reaction has been to discount the feasibility and usefulness of network maps. Its trade group, the Institute of International Finance (IIF), decided to set up its own market monitoring group to "connect the dots" and "build a systemic picture" of the markets, yet it stopped short of recommending a network map.

"The practical and the concrete tools to have people do this are still being developed," says Hung Q. Tran, the IIF's senior director of capital markets and emerging market policy. "It's difficult in many instances to see how relevant information can be collected and made available to people at the right time."

The mappers' plans need to be more specific, too, said the Fed official. "There would be lots of different types of network maps," the official says. "There would be funding maps. There would be hedging maps for different types of market risk. Some of that we've been able to get further on, but I don't think we'd ever be able to get the full view of the market."

Yet, even if the United States balks, other countries may go ahead with network mapping. In February, Otmar Issing and Jan Krahnen, members of a commission advising the German government, wrote in the *Financial Times* that a global network map was "a vital element" for preventing future crises. And the main consultative document prepared for the European Union also recommended a map of global risks. But, without cooperation from the United States, any supposedly global map will be woefully incomplete. In the end, the question may be whether Washington is finally willing to stand up to the industry . . . for its own sake.

Daniel Altman

Daniel Altman is president of North Yard Economics, a nonprofit consulting firm serving developing countries. He is writing a book on the future of the global economy.

ANTHONY RUSSO

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Kabul Notes

A journey into Afghanistan.

Return to Afghanistan with a group of journalists, escorted by the French defense minister, Hervé Morin. A limited view: We only see valleys in Surobi and Kapisa. But an invaluable glimpse, nevertheless, because it counters what is heard almost everywhere.

First chapter, Tora, a small fort sitting on stones, some distance from Kabul. Welcome by Colonel Benoît Durieux, leader of the regiment and an intellectual, author of the excellent *Rereading Clausewitz's On War*. Movement toward Surobi, where an assembly of *malik*, the sages of the region, waits for us to join a ceremony opening a small school for boys. The number of armored vehicles mobilized for the trip, the extreme nervousness of the men, as well as the low-flying Caracal helicopter that brought us here early this morning, at times hovering only ten meters above the ground—all this leaves no doubt about the seriousness of the threat. But there is also no doubt about the fact that the military's strategy relies on a simple idea that has little to do with the caricature drawn by my country's media: to show that we are, of course, there to wage war, but also that the stakes of this war are the security, peace, and access to care and education of a population for whom the coalition is an ally. Rocco, a base in the heart of the Uzbin Valley, ten kilometers upstream from the place where ten French Special Forces soldiers were killed in August 2008. It is another western encampment, even more isolated and surrounded by mountains. Camping there in tents reinforced with plywood, in preparation for winter, are 159 men. They had just barely set up camp, Captain Vacina tells me, when the elections arrived, as did the Taliban's bombardment of polling places, the response of the Afghan regular forces supported by these troops, and the incredible spectacle of people from the countryside coming to vote in the midst of bombs and machine gun fire. An occupation force, really? Neo-colonialism, like the useful idiots of Islamo-progressivism say? Armies, like people, have an unconscious, and I do not deny that temptation can exist. But what I see there, for the moment, is this: a military force that has come, literally, to allow people to vote. Tagab, in the heart of Kapisa province, further north still, is where I come across Colonel Chanson, who, as a young Blue Beret in Sarajevo, remembers having denied me access to Mount Igman 15 years ago. The same mountainous landscape, though at the foot of these mountains there is a green valley infested with armed groups. The base of operation was bombarded yesterday. Two days earlier, a more intense attack provoked a sortie. And the colonel recounted the climb toward the opposite position, the occupation of the ridge, the skirmish with a jihadist combat unit on the way back, the very difficult combat, and, finally, the routing of the attackers. Nejrab, 18 kilometers to the north, also in the Kapisa valley. It is this fourth base that houses the Third Battalion of the Afghan national army, under the command of Colonel Khalili. I recall my recommendation in my 2002 Afghanistan report commissioned by then–French President Jacques Chirac: Aid the building of a national Afghan army and allow it, as soon as possible, to assume responsibility for isolating, and then defeating, the neo-fascist Taliban. And now, that is exactly what is happening, if I believe Khalili's explanations. He's the one ultimately responsible for the sorties. He is the one who decides to request—or not—reinforcements from the French battalion. And also under his command are the notorious American "advisers." Once again, the opposite of the cliché. Once again, the inverse of the accepted image of a Franco-American war in which Afghans are only bit players. Bagram, finally. The U.S. base in Bagram. The terrible secret prison, impossible to approach, 200 meters from where I am. And the 42 men of the French Harfang detachment who are in charge of two drones, piloted on the ground by navigators trained on Mirage jets and furnishing the troops with all the information likely to reduce the risks of their operations. The "low-intensity" conflict whose result, as everyone well knows, is never only military. I didn't see everything, of course. But what I did see is this: An ugly war, like every war; but a just war, less poorly led than is said, and a war that can, with the right choices, be won.

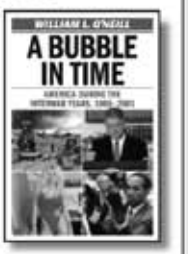
Bernard-Henri Lévy

Bernard-Henri Lévy is the author of Left in Dark Times: A Stand Against the New Barbarism. *Translated from French by Sara Phenix.*

ANTHONY RUSSO

Stimulus package.

William L. O'Neill
A Bubble in Time



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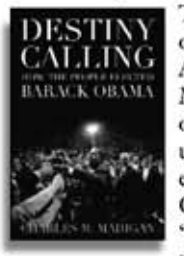
Charles M. Madigan
Destiny Calling



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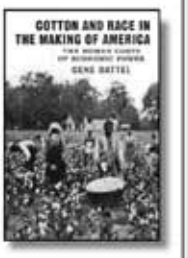
Gene Dattel
Cotton and Race in the Making of America



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No Exit

The never-ending lunacy of Betsy McCaughey.

MICHELLE COTTLE

On an ordinary day, Henry Aaron, senior fellow in economic studies at the Brookings Institution in Washington, comes across as the quintessential policy wonk: knowledgeable, thoughtful, measured, perhaps even a tad boring. With his rumpled suits, snowy hair, and rosy jowls, the genial septuagenarian brings to mind one's favorite uncle—assuming that uncle had spent the past 40 years exploring tax policy, health care financing, and the intricacies of sprawling entitlement programs. He is, in short, not the kind of guy you'd expect, in his opening statement in a debate on health care reform held before the National Association of State Comprehensive Health Insurance Plans, to launch an extended, blistering, ad hominem attack on his opponent.

But this mid-September afternoon holds no ordinary encounter, and the object of Aaron's broadside is no ordinary adversary. A few feet from his maroon-flocked podium sits Betsy McCaughey, former lieutenant governor of New York, former fellow with the conservative Hudson Institute, and longtime scourge of health care reform. A constitutional scholar by training, McCaughey (pronounced "McCoy") blazed to fame in 1994 as the person who drove a stake through the heart of Hillarycare, with a detailed (and, as it turned out, false) takedown of the plan published in this very magazine. Fifteen years later, she has reemerged for an encore, penning op-eds and making the TV and radio rounds to issue apocalyptic warnings about the horrors lurking in the fine print of Obamacare. Pick an inflammatory, misleading rumor that has sprung up in this debate, and chances are McCaughey had a hand in springing it. She has, for instance, warned that a provision buried in the stimulus bill will soon have computers dictating doctors' treatment of patients based on government protocols. More notably, she sounded the (false) alarm that the White House aims to ration care based on patients' value to society—an idea that swiftly morphed into the "death panel" hysteria and then quickly became entangled in McCaughey's equally outrageous claim that the proposed reforms would force seniors into regular chats with their doctors about how to end their lives. That such claims are untrue in no way dims McCaughey's zeal. Confronted with conflicting information, she plows ahead with her unique interpretation of reality, leaving critics on both the left and the right nonplussed. One's only options, they say, are to ignore her and hope that she fades away—or to go negative in the hope of discrediting her.

So it is that Aaron finds himself standing in the Crystal Ballroom of the Doubletree Hotel in Arlington, Virginia, running through PowerPoint slides that detail—quote by excruciating quote—McCaughey's reputation as among the most irresponsible, dishonest, and destructive players on the public stage. He starts with Politifact.com's categorization of her commentary as "Pants on Fire," followed by *New York Times* articles debunking her assertions, followed by complaints from economist Gail Wilensky (adviser to John McCain's presidential campaign and head of Medicare financing under the first President Bush) that "these charges of death panels, euthanasia and withholding care from the disabled give rational, knowledgeable, thoughtful conservatives a bad name." Next comes a denunciation of McCaughey's "fraudulent scare tactics" by John Paris, professor of bioethics at Boston College; AARP executive vice president John Rother's protest that her statements are "rife with gross—even cruel—distortions"; a scolding editorial by *The Washington Post* about McCaughey's characterization of White House health policy adviser Ezekiel "Zeke" Emanuel as "Dr. Death"; and, to wrap it all up, Stuart Butler, vice president of domestic policy at the conservative Heritage Foundation, expressing dismay that the "personal attacks on good people like Zeke are outrageous. There are real policy issues that should be debated vigorously, but slandering a good person's name is beyond the pale." At one point, the debate moderator felt moved to reach over and give McCaughey's hand a comforting pat. She dipped her chin and stuck out her bottom lip in good-humored appreciation.

What kind of person drives normally staid wonks, including her own ideological teammates, to such stinging public reproof? Part of it is obviously the nature of her commentary. But beyond that, there is something about McCaughey herself that drives her critics wild—and has throughout much of her career. Friends posit it's her disconcerting blend of brains, beauty, and confidence. Detractors chalk it up to her rank dishonesty, narcissism, and lack of shame. Whatever the cause, the passion McCaughey inflames is familiar. Looking over the sweep of McCaughey's life, from her swift political rise (and fall) to her humble roots, from her straight-talking persona, fierce will, and blinding confidence to her gift for self-dramatization, head-turning looks, and embrace of the gender card, one sees precursors of a more recent conservative phenom. Replace the East Coast researcher's political-outsider, stats-wielding, pointy-head shtick with a political-outsider, gun-toting, populist one, and a striking parallel emerges: Betsy McCaughey is, in essence, the blue-state Sarah Palin.

Blonde, wide-eyed, and smiley, McCaughey doesn't look much like a formidable political brawler. A well-tended 60, she still has a penchant for short, high-slit skirts, revealing blouses, and spike heels—all on display at her afternoon debate with Aaron—which give the impression less of poised-to-kill tiger than on-the-prowl cougar. Prone to sitting with her mouth slightly open, as though she can't take in quite enough air through her pert nose, and every now and again flashing a grin that seems more involuntary tic than deliberate response to anything occurring around her, McCaughey radiates aggressive optimism mixed with spaciness and just a dash of vulnerability.

But McCaughey is no powder puff. She clawed her way up from a troubled, blue-collar background that makes Palin look like a spoiled debutante by comparison. Born Elizabeth Helen Peterken in Pittsburgh, Betsy spent most of her youth in Westport, Connecticut, along with her twin brother, William. Her mother was an alcoholic who died of liver disease at age 42 (a year after Betsy graduated from college), and her father was a maintenance worker in a factory that made nail clippers. Over

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the years, McCaughey (who opted to respond to my inquiries via e-mail) has been vague about her early life, making occasional reference to some not-so-pleasant memories. She says her lean upbringing helped her understand what it's like to struggle for basic needs like health care (which her family could not afford, she points out). Longtime friend Brondi Borer says it also instilled in her a fearlessness and a fierce work ethic. "The way she got everything she got was by working hard and being smart and having to be better than [those around her]," Borer says. "Nothing came easily to her when she was growing up." A competitive and conscientious student, McCaughey won a scholarship to a boarding school in Massachusetts for her last two years of high school, followed by a scholarship to Vassar. From there, she went on to earn a Ph.D. in history from Columbia. But McCaughey was well aware that a fine education wasn't her only shot at a better lifestyle. She once quipped to the Albany *Times Union* that, while at Vassar, she only dated Yalies. In 1972, she married one, Thomas McCaughey, an aspiring investment banker with whom she had three daughters. For the next 20 years, as her husband conquered Wall Street, Betsy dabbled in a number of careers (writing books, lecturing at her alma maters, guest curating at a local museum—at one point, she even toyed with becoming a TV reporter). But, in 1992, she and Thomas split, and Betsy found herself cast out of her comfortable role as Park Avenue wife.

With the help of a friend on the board of the Manhattan Institute, Betsy landed a fellowship at the conservative think tank, with a mandate to write about electoral reform and the legal system. Instead, in early 1994, she published a scathing vivisection of the Clinton health care plan in THE NEW REPUBLIC. Touting her academic experience, McCaughey painted herself as a dispassionate truth-seeker who felt an obligation to read the entire 1,342-page bill (something few lawmakers were willing to do) and flag its malignancies for the rest of us. To emphasize how judicious her research was, McCaughey sprinkled her article with page numbers, directing readers to the exact subsections and footnotes of the text on which her criticisms were based. But, while McCaughey's reading may have been uncommonly thorough, it was also fundamentally incorrect—or grossly dishonest, depending on your view of her (and of a recent *Rolling Stone* article exposing her consultations with Big Tobacco during the writing). One of her most resonant claims, that the bill would bar people from paying their doctors for care beyond what the government plan covered, was utter bunk. And the analysis went downhill from there, as TNR staffers, among others, later detailed. ("The force of her articles derived from her claim that there was 'no exit' from [Clinton's] mandatory insurance plans. She was wrong," Mickey Kaus wrote the following year.) By the time such misinformation was dismantled, however, it was too late. Prominent reform opponents from Senator Bob Dole to columnist George Will ran with her claims, and Betsy soon found herself the new darling of the GOP. From the ashes of Hillarycare a political star was born.

LONG BEFORE PALIN was hauled in from Wasilla to save John McCain's presidential bacon, McCaughey was shuffled from academic obscurity into the political big leagues to help conservative gubernatorial candidate George Pataki woo the moderate female voters of New York. Like Palin, McCaughey was essentially unknown to the head of her ticket. Her Hillarycare piece had caught the eye of then–New York kingmaker Senator Al D'Amato, who—comparing her to Jeane Kirkpatrick—delivered her to Pataki as a pretty political ingénue with policy cred.

McCaughey survived the campaign well enough. She has an enthusiastic, almost motivational speaking style and clearly enjoys the spotlight. Celebrated for both her brains and beauty, she was declared a brave new model of feminist pol. (A glam-shot photo spread in *Vanity Fair* set the GOP abuzz, while the *New York Post* cheered her for having "Henry Kissinger's brains and Jessica Rabbit's body.") Even some of her academic quirkiness—her love of raw data and obsession with pie charts—conveyed a not-politics-as-usual freshness. Admittedly, there were bumps of the sort former Governor Palin could sympathize with: Anonymous Pataki staffers dropped quotes about the newbie candidate being unusually self-absorbed, and her frequent clashes with the veteran Pataki aide assigned to help her adjust to campaign life were downright operatic. (During one battle, McCaughey had her campaign van pull over on the side of a highway as she shrieked at the aide to get out.) But the fantasy didn't seriously unravel until after she and Pataki won.

From the get-go, it was clear McCaughey had no intention of fading into the background like most lieutenant governors. Even before taking office, she used her own money to hire a publicist to boost her profile. Seizing her role as resident policy expert a little too vigorously, McCaughey began inundating the governor with policy papers. When Pataki tried to brush her back ("I'm the quarterback of this team," he once growled), McCaughey began going off the reservation, issuing unauthorized reports and press releases and publicly contradicting various administration positions. Some early missteps could be written off as inexperience, such as when she voiced her pro-choice views at the state Conservative Party's convention. Others smacked of naked, if perplexing, self-promotion. Most famously, she chose to remain standing during the full hour of Pataki's 1996 State of the State address, her face hovering over him in all of the camera shots.

After that, things really got nasty. Pataki aides and other party leaders slammed McCaughey as a disloyal, self-promoting, "unstable," "paranoid" "ditz." (Pataki's chief spokesperson, Zenia Mucha, was an especially harsh detractor, once musing, "How do you describe someone who is too bizarre to describe?") The governor stopped including his lieutenant in meetings—or talking with her about much of anything. For several weeks, he pulled McCaughey's police protection following allegations that she had been using her troopers as errand boys. The state GOP chairman publicly attacked her; she got into a radio smackdown with the state parks commissioner; and, for a time, party leaders refused to make her a delegate to the 1996 Republican National Convention.

Whatever the roots of the feud, McCaughey's self-dramatizing, often erratic reaction to it furrowed brows. She took to the radio to denounce Pataki's people of "McCarthyism" for questioning her loyalty. She accused the governor of instructing the trooper assigned to drive her of intentionally making her late for an official event. (Not long thereafter, McCaughey's press secretary quit, claiming she had been asked to lie in support of McCaughey's story. McCaughey offered to take a polygraph test to prove her claims.) She even suggested to the press that her children might become targets of her political enemies. Upset over her exclusion from the Republican convention, she made plans to attend as a correspondent for a local radio station. Word on the street was that she had begun meeting with Democratic consultants and was considering switching parties to challenge D'Amato for his Senate seat. In an unrelated episode, but one that fed her eccentric image, when McCaughey's housekeeper accused her of harassment and of failure to pay taxes on the woman's wages, the lieutenant gover-

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nor called a press conference to deny all charges, during which she dramatically slammed $1.44 down in front of the cameras and declared it the sum total of what she owed the state labor department.

Few were surprised when Pataki dropped McCaughey from his reelection ticket in April 1997. By year's end, she had become a Democrat (grandly invoking Winston Churchill—"I'd rather change parties than change my principles"—to explain the shift) and launched her own bid for governor. The maneuver discombobulated both parties. Some Democratic leaders saw McCaughey as a grasping, unqualified opportunist. But, by that time, she was the wife of Wall Street big dog Wilbur Ross. (In December 1995, the bride and groom, an even more prosperous Yalie than Betsy's first husband—Ross has been a member of *Forbes*'s billionaires club since 2005—held their reception aboard the decommissioned aircraft carrier *Intrepid*, surrounded by their 600 nearest and dearest.) A staunch Democrat, Ross had pledged not only to fund his beloved's gubernatorial run, but also to open his wallet to supportive down-ticket candidates.

This, understandably, did not sit well with McCaughey's primary competitors. Nor did McCaughey's challenge ease tensions with Pataki, her boss/rival. (Even as she ran against him, she declined to resign the lieutenant governorship.) Two months after switching teams, she grew suspicious that Pataki was bugging her phones. She brought in a counter-surveillance expert to do a sweep of both her office and home, and, when he didn't find anything, refused to pay his $3,000 fee, the contractor alleged. (Like so many of McCaughey's troubles, this one made its way into the tabs.) Compounding her troubles, the candidate was tearing through campaign staff like tissues (continuing the trend she'd set as lieutenant governor). She had a reputation as a controlling, demanding, abusive micromanager, and every week seemed to bring news of another staffer heading out the door. (One woman lasted only a day.) With each departure came a string of unflattering quotes about McCaughey's instability, indecisiveness, and narcissism. "A lot of politicians are out for the limelight, but Betsy's constant need twenty-four hours a day was something I'd never seen," departed aide Kayla Bergeron marveled to the *Daily News*. Speechwriter Sam Thernstrom charged that McCaughey tried to force him to stay by involving his mother, writer Abigail Thernstrom, who was an old friend of the candidate's: "She said if my mother didn't make me stay, she'd make certain I never worked again."

For a while—a long while actually—McCaughey won plaudits from many New Yorkers as a hard-charging, independent woman whose troubles stemmed largely from her refusal to be pushed around by a sexist political establishment. Part of this flowed from the periodic cretinism of male colleagues—like the time D'Amato suggested his new protégé secure Mayor Giuliani's endorsement for the 1996 ticket by making him "an offer he couldn't refuse," or the time Democratic Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver wiggled his hips mockingly while snarking that he didn't possess McCaughey's powers of persuasion. But the lieutenant governor fueled this battle-of-the-sexes storyline when it suited her. A couple of years into the job, when State Senate Majority Leader Joe Bruno publicly groused about her "overly aggressive" lobbying, McCaughey countered: "When a man makes a stance in defense of the public, he's called a man of principle. When a woman does, she's criticized as being overly aggressive." Later, as her feud with Pataki heated up, the lieutenant governor publicly complained that she was under attack for not being part of the old boys' network. And when, two weeks shy of the 1998 Demo-

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cratic primary, McCaughey announced that her husband Wilbur was cutting off her campaign funding—a move presaging the couple's post-election divorce—she kicked the woman-against-the-odds shtick into high gear. Failing to secure her new party's nomination, she nonetheless stayed in the general election on the Liberal Party line. Sure, she was facing a rough road, she told *The Washington Post* at the time, but, she noted, "Women, especially, are saying to me, 'You go, girl!' " Come November, McCaughey pulled less than 2 percent of the vote.

However badly McCaughey may have been treated by the men in her life, the defiant, go-girl shtick was an odd choice for a woman whose candidacy had been almost single-handedly bankrolled by her husband. But McCaughey is not one to get hung up on such ironies. Nor did she apparently put much stock in the old adage of live by the husband's wallet, die by the husband's wallet. Rather than put the unpleasantness behind her, two years after the election, McCaughey filed a $40 million fraud suit against her by-then ex-husband, claiming that he had reneged on his promise to fund her campaign unconditionally. In the meantime, she returned to the world of conservative think tanks, this time looking to political pal and president of the Hudson Institute Herbert London for a fellowship at his shop, where she remained until just a few months ago. (The dissolution of her post was unrelated to her recent notoriety, London assures me.) Retaining an interest in the health care system, McCaughey began crusading to reduce the number of hospital-contracted infections, and, in 2004, founded RID, the Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths—a worthy, if not especially high-profile, pursuit. As for the abuse heaped upon her during her political years, McCaughey harrumphed to the *New York Post* about how easy it was for women such as herself to be dismissed as "ditzy" or "the dumb blonde." "That will change," she predicted, "as more women enter into politics." No evolution (or even revolution) in gender politics or regular politics, however, is likely to dispel the aura of melodrama that seems embedded in McCaughey's genetic code. As *Vanity Fair* scribe Michael Wolff, a knife-edged observer of all things Upper East Side, puts it, in a quote that sounds eerily like a description of Sarah Palin, "There was always this sense of chaos that surrounded her."

As McCaughey finds herself in the middle of yet another maelstrom, friends and supporters express dismay at people's eagerness to say such terrible things about her. They stress her sincerity, her intellectual integrity, and her commitment to the facts. "Betsy does her homework" is an oft-repeated theme. "I have trouble buying into the premise that she is making errors and wrong and false statements because she's so meticulous, and she'll give you a source on everything," says Elizabeth Whelan, head of the American Council on Science and Health, an industry-friendly (and -funded) group on whose board McCaughey sits. Certainly, McCaughey has cultivated an image as facts-focused truth-teller, usually by way of contrast with the slipperiness of political types. Recounting her fateful first reading of the Clinton bill, McCaughey told TNR in late 1994, "I was shocked. … For the historian, the ultimate value is being faithful to the truth. And the plan was very different from what I'd been led to believe." During the heat of her gubernatorial race, McCaughey, asked about her ideological leanings, told *The New York Times* that she thought of herself "more than anything, as an honest, call-them-as-I-see-them person." And she invariably presents her warnings about Obamacare as part of her commitment to exposing the truth, no matter how unpopular. As Borer sees it, that's what makes McCaughey such a lightning rod. "It's the emperor's new clothes," she explains. "That's what Betsy's all about: Looking at the emperor walking down the street and being the one saying, 'He doesn't have any clothes on.' "

By contrast, McCaughey's many detractors would argue that the problem is her dogged insistence that the emperor has no clothes when everyone else can see that he's wearing flat-front khakis and a navy-blue golf shirt. While not everything she says is off the mark, says Gail Wilensky, one of McCaughey's conservative critics, "It's very frustrating to see somebody who makes outrageous statements that bear no relationship to reality receive so much attention." Yes, McCaughey professes to have read the legislation currently circulating, and, as in 1994, she brandishes that fact like a talisman that can dispel any conflicting viewpoint. But, also as in 1994, she spins out an indefensibly sinister, apocalyptic translation of the text that no amount of countervailing evidence can shake. Thus, health care adviser Emanuel's theoretical writings about how to allocate scarce resources, such as human organs, morph into McCaughey's conviction that Obama's "deadly doctor" advocates denying treatment to the elderly and infirm on cost-benefit grounds. Likewise, a database to coordinate information on which treatments work best for which patients—an initiative supported by wonks across the political spectrum—is seen by McCaughey as the first step toward government-programmed computers ordering doctors how to do their jobs. Within the self-styled empiricist resides the mind of a pathological alarmist.

Asked why her analysis bears no resemblance to that of other experts regardless of ideology, McCaughey consistently responds, "My reading of the bills is correct." Even when it is pointed out that her interpretation is clearly hyperbolic—e.g., her fantastic assertion on Fred Thompson's radio show that "Congress would make it mandatory, absolutely require, that, every five years, people in Medicare have a required counseling session that will tell them how to end their life sooner"—she will not budge. Ironically, her familiarity with the data, combined with her unrecognizable interpretation of it, makes it nearly impossible to combat McCaughey's claims in a traditional debate. her standard m.o. (as "Daily Show" host Jon Stewart recently experienced) is to greet each bit of contradictory evidence by insisting that her questioner is poorly informed and should take a closer look at paragraph X or footnote Z. When those sections don't support her interpretation, she continues to throw out page numbers and footnotes until the mountain of data is so high as to obscure the fact that none of the numbers add up to what she has claimed. "It's impossible to keep up with the quantity of misinformation," laments Henry Aaron. "It's like being sprayed with muddy water."

Since her earliest days in the spotlight, McCaughey has presented herself as a just-the-facts-please, above-the-fray political outsider. In reality, she has proved devastatingly adept at manipulating charts and stats to suit her ideological (and personal) ambitions. It is this proud piety concerning her own straight-shooting integrity combined with her willingness to peddle outrageous fictions—and her complete inability to recognize, much less be shamed by, this behavior—that makes McCaughey so infuriating. In this way, perhaps most of all, she resembles the tell-it-like-it-is good ol' girl Palin, whose scorching self-regard and ostentatious disdain for politics-as-usual infuse even her most self-serving fabulisms. Palin, of course, hawks homespun wisdom, faith, and common sense, in contrast to McCaughey's figures and footnotes. But both women have an uncanny ability to shovel their toxic nonsense with nary a blink, tremor, or break in those dazzling smiles. People of goodwill and honest counsel don't stand a chance. ◆

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Course Correction

My term at Afghanistan's graduate school of war.

GANESH SITARAMAN

Can the U.S. military learn about counterinsurgency quickly enough to save Kabul—and the rest of Afghanistan?

Camp Julien is surrounded by reminders of Afghanistan's past. The coalition military base—which sits in the hills south of Kabul, just high enough to rise above the thick cloud of smog that perpetually blankets the city—is flanked by two European-style palaces built in the 1920s by the modernizing King Amanullah. Home to Soviet troops and mujahedin during the past decades of war, the now-crumbling palaces are littered with bullet holes and decorated with graffiti in multiple languages. Uphill from Julien is the old Russian officers' club, dating from the Soviet invasion and featuring a recently refilled swimming pool that overlooks the southern half of the city. The pool is said to have been the site of executions in the 1990s; the condemned were apparently shot off the diving board.

The project underway at Camp Julien aims to help the United States and its allies succeed where King Amanullah, the Russians, and even the mujahedin failed. Julien is home to the Counterinsurgency Training Center–Afghanistan, where U.S. and coalition forces are trying to teach themselves and Afghans how to fight a different kind of war. For one week each month, 130 students descend on Julien to learn about counterinsurgency. Attendees come from every possible background: U.S. and coalition troops of all ranks, ages, and nationalities; State Department and USAID personnel; Afghan soldiers and police; members of NGOs; contractors; Army anthropologists. (I was there in July as part of my research on law in situations of counterinsurgency.)

Overseeing the center is an American colonel named John Agoglia. The Brooklyn native is both impossibly considerate and, at six feet and 215 pounds, incredibly imposing—a fact compounded by his loud, decisive manner. "No one here is a subject-matter expert in counterinsurgency," he announces to his students on the first day of their course. "If you think you're an expert, it indicates to me you've stopped learning, don't have an open mind, and you should leave. We're *all* students here."

His strength, he told me, lies not in creating ideas but in synthesizing them. The result is that Agoglia presides over something akin to the Aspen Ideas Festival of Afghanistan. Sitting around a campfire or in the center's small, plywood-walled conference room, groups one would never expect to see together talk late into the night about counterinsurgency theory or metrics for measuring the efficacy of development aid. Agoglia's staff contributes to this vibrancy. His 15 instructors include French and Australian officers, as well as U.S. troops with varied experiences. Their offices are filled with books on counterinsurgency operations and Afghan history—from the conqueror Babur's memoirs to histories of the British-Afghan wars of the

Chad Hunt

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nineteenth century. Julien may not fit the image of an ordinary military installation, but counterinsurgency has long been considered atypical—the province of warrior-scholars like General David Petraeus (who has a Ph.D. from Princeton) or John Nagl (a Rhodes Scholar with a doctorate from Oxford). Indeed, the Army and Marine Corps' *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* opens with what has become a popular epigram: "Counterinsurgency is not just thinking man's warfare—it is the graduate level of war."

This more sophisticated style of warfare is now central to Afghanistan's future. General Stanley McChrystal, who oversees the coalition effort in the country, issued a tactical directive in early July to his forces. It was a striking document that effectively reversed the central theory of the great wars of the twentieth century—destroy the military and the will of the people. Instead, McChrystal told the troops that "we will not win based on the number of Taliban we kill," and he cautioned against using air attacks because they might cause civilian casualties. An alienated population, he argued, would threaten the mission's success. More recently, McChrystal has identified another tenet of counterinsurgency as a crucial objective in the fight for Afghanistan: improving governance at all levels. As counterinsurgency theorist David Kilcullen has noted, "a government that is losing to an insurgency is not being outfought, it is being outgoverned."

Now, President Obama must decide whether to give McChrystal the additional troops he is requesting to carry out this strategy. Before he does, he will have to determine whether he thinks counterinsurgency can truly succeed in Afghanistan. And the answer to that question hinges partly on whether our military can learn this type of warfare, and learn it quickly. "I expect our force to internalize and operate in accordance with my intent," McChrystal wrote in his July directive. "Following this intent requires a cultural shift within our forces—and complete understanding at every level—down to the most junior soldiers." An entirely new mindset is a tall order for a massive bureaucracy. If you want a sense of whether it can be done, there is no better place to visit than Camp Julien—Afghanistan's graduate school of war.

"How many of you have read David Galula's *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*?" Lt. Colonel Matt Galton, the deputy director of the center, asked in his Australian accent. Two hands slowly went up. It was not surprising. Though Galula's book is a—possibly *the*—classic starting point for counterinsurgency, it was written over 40 years ago and isn't required reading. More troubling, when Galton asked how many had read the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, only about five hands went up.

This was surprising, given how pervasive, even trendy, counterinsurgency has become in policy circles. In the nearly three years since the release of the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, its authors have gone on to fame, at least in the public policy world: Nagl appeared on "The Daily Show"; Kilcullen is a frequent television commentator; and Petraeus, the lead author of the manual, is now the head of U.S. Central Command—in charge of the military's operations in the Middle East. But, despite the coaches' rise to prominence, most of the players haven't read the playbook.

"I didn't even know counterinsurgency was a term," Lieutenant Aaron Lewis said of his tour of duty in Iraq in 2004 and 2005. "I felt something was wrong with what we were doing … but I didn't know what." Born in Silver City, New Mexico—the home of Billy the Kid, he noted—Lewis had been a bored college student studying political science at New Mexico State University. When it came time to declare a major, he decided he wasn't ready. "I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. I hadn't really done anything yet. How could I make that decision?"

After enlisting in the Army, Lewis served a tour in Kandahar in 2002 and a tour in Iraq. "The Army should be proactive, but we were reactive in Iraq," he said. "We just didn't know what to do." Lewis is naturally inquisitive and curious; he asked more questions than any other student in the course, and often the hardest and most pointed ones. Now an officer, Lewis had tried to learn more about counterinsurgency, reading on his own, talking to peers about their experiences, and volunteering for courses like this one. But, prior to deploying to Afghanistan, he had little counterinsurgency training, and he found that counterinsurgency still carried a stigma among members of armor and maneuver units, who prefer the straightforward nature of conventional warfare to the nuance and discretion required for successful counterinsurgency. "The challenge for the Army is that the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* expresses a mindset—it's as close as the Army gets to philosophy. And we're not good at teaching that," Lewis said. "You can tell someone how far the rifle shoots, but you can't really do the same with counterinsurgency."

Still, Agoglia's instructors must try. On the first day alone, students see dozens of slides, capturing a century of counterinsurgency theory. Some are impossibly complicated. The conflict ecosystem and the support structures for insurgency look like the animal food chain from elementary school biology class—arrows in every direction showing feedback loops, backlash effects, and the interconnections of the social system needed to sustain an insurgency.

"Security, governance, and development," Captain Mike Barry announced with the ease and authority of a second-tour officer who now spends his days reading about counterinsurgency. "These are the three pillars of counterinsurgency. This is how you win the population." When groups of students assembled around him during the week, Agoglia frequently told them that governance was the most important of the three. "I'm an infantryman telling you that," he joked, "so it must be true!" Yet, on the first day, many of the students chafed upon hearing that they might have to do what the military calls "civil affairs." "We're not trained to do governance and development," one young officer said. Another chimed in: "Shouldn't the State Department and others be doing this? This isn't our job."

Agoglia runs a tight ship and would not let the group move on until the dissenters at least acknowledged his point: "We have limited resources. There aren't enough people from the State Department or USAID to do these operations. So we have two choices: Either we don't do it and risk the mission, or we step up to the plate and take on the challenge." The dissenters recognized that they were beat and finally caved when Agoglia appealed to their honor as soldiers. "In my Army, we get the job done," he said. "Whatever it takes."

One key tenet of counterinsurgency is that you need to understand the local population. Spending time at Camp Julien made clear that we still have a long way to go on that front. When an Afghan interpreter asked the students during a presentation how many read the local papers, listened to local radio, or had someone translate or brief them on the local news each day, about a dozen (out of 130) raised their hands. In a debriefing session later that day, a group of young officers asked why their commanders didn't require everyone to follow the local news. Another officer said he had met fellow officers who

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explained that they were too busy to sit down over tea with village elders in order to build strong relationships; they only had time for official meetings.

But the problem runs deeper than just keeping up with local news or having the requisite cups of tea with residents. Instructors at Julien worried about the fear of casualties—particularly the fear of IEDs—pushing troops and civilians to stay on their bases as much as possible. The *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* rejects this approach, noting, in perhaps its most difficult paradox, that "sometimes, the more you protect your force, the less secure you may be." In the long run, the security of the base is a mirage: It leaves the population constantly at risk and increases the danger to soldiers whenever they venture out. And it prevents soldiers from understanding the people they are trying to protect.

One of the center's priorities is teaching students tools for quickly understanding a local community. Students use the acronym ASCOPE to identify the Areas, Structures, Capabilities, Organizations, People, and Events in a particular province, district, or village. After my small group did an ASCOPE analysis for Herat province in western Afghanistan, we realized not only how much counterinsurgents need to know about an area but also how little we knew—despite the fact that much of the group was deployed in Herat. Most conceded that they probably couldn't do an ASCOPE for their home state back in the United States or Europe. How many knew the names of their local politicians or the most important economic and social leaders in the state? How many knew the location and status of the relevant infrastructure—water treatment plants, hospitals, utility providers? Like politics, all counterinsurgency is local.

Even the most conscientious efforts to connect with Afghans can sometimes go awry. During my time at Julien, an Afghan National Army general—a soldier throughout the last three decades of war—was invited to the base to give a talk on insurgency. After a 20-minute discussion of the differences between violent and peaceful demonstrations and how the police should deal with them, I saw Agoglia write "WTF?!" in his notebook. The general was in the army, not the police; why was he talking about how to manage demonstrators? I had thought he was describing possible courses of action if the upcoming elections led to protests. But it was nothing so clever. In Dari, Afghanistan's most widely spoken language, the words for "demonstration" and "insurgency" are similar, and the general's staff thought the request was for a talk on demonstrations, not insurgency. A minor error in translation, but one that signified the magnitude of the challenge. The professionals at Camp Julien can teach counterinsurgency as well as possible, but in Afghanistan, the lack of local knowledge continually risks disaster.

Like any good graduate school, the counterinsurgency center at Julien is interested not just in teaching but in cutting-edge research. This summer, Agoglia and British Brigadier Neil Baverstock created a new program, under which civilian academic researchers could spend a few weeks or longer at Camp Julien, using the base as their jumping-off point for field research in Afghanistan. (I visited Julien as a participant in this program.)

Professors Eli Berman of the University of California, San Diego, and Jason Lyall of Yale were at the base during my time there. Berman and Lyall are part of a team conducting a multi-country study on the relationship between development programs and violence. Throughout the military, development agencies like USAID, and academia, there is a general assumption that economic development reduces violence. The basic idea is that development programs create well-being, and those who are well-off are less likely to join an insurgency. The evidence, however, is largely anecdotal, and no one knows which programs get the biggest bang for their buck. Is it road construction or irrigation projects? Building schools or drilling wells?

In an earlier study, Berman (collaborating with Jacob Shapiro of Princeton and Colonel Joseph Felter of Stanford) looked at development spending in Iraq through the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP), a discretionary fund available to military commanders. They found that, prior to the surge, CERP spending was insignificant in reducing violence. If the theory was that spending always improves security, it failed. Only after the surge, with an increased security presence and more contact between U.S. troops and Iraqi civilians, did CERP spending decrease violence.

Berman and Lyall are now proposing the gold standard of social-science research for Afghanistan: a randomized experiment. USAID, commanders disbursing CERP money, and development contractors often have to choose which programs to spend their limited resources on. What Berman and Lyall suggest is that they use their discretion in a way that enables the scholars to collect data akin to that provided by a randomized medical trial. Once the programs are completed, Berman and Lyall can crunch the numbers and identify which projects were successful under what conditions.

"It's been a challenge, but we're making a lot of progress," Berman told me. The military has been supportive of their efforts. After all, if Berman and Lyall can provide some sense of which programs are working, their research could guide smarter, more effective spending in the future. "It's not how much money you spend," Agoglia told me, "it's how effective the program is in accomplishing the goals. Right now, we only know how much money we spend. We need these guys to help us measure the effects." Though Berman and Lyall's project is promising, it is striking that, after eight years in Afghanistan, no one actually knows which development programs—if any—reduce violence.

By the fifth day of the course, the curriculum seemed to be working. The students were more focused on the population and understood that thoughtful planning, non-military operations, and patience were the keys to success. Their mindset had shifted. "It's been incredible to see the younger officers change their views and build on each day's lessons," Colonel Jeanne Arnold, who leads an advisory group to one of the U.S. commanders, told me. "I've read a lot about counterinsurgency, but I'm amazed at how fast these guys are picking it up."

Over the course of the next six months, the counterinsurgency center at Julien will expand. Yet there will still be a limit to how many troops the center can train at any given time. It's been almost three years since the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* appeared in print and two years since General Petraeus helped make counterinsurgency the most prominent military strategy since containment. But, for all the publicity, too few in the field have truly internalized counterinsurgency. Agoglia and his staff are engaged in a race to make up for lost time—a sprint to change the mindset of the military before Afghanistan deteriorates further.

Toward the end of the course, I tracked down Lieutenant Lewis. He was more worried than when he had started the week. "There are so many smart people here with great ideas," he said. "It sounds like we know what to do. So what's the problem? What's taking so long?" ◆

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Ending Our Age of Suffering

A plan to stop genocide.

DANIEL JONAH GOLDHAGEN

Genocide is much discussed and poorly understood. It is regularly decried, yet little is done to prevent it. It is seen to be one of the most intractable of modern phenomena, a periodic cataclysm that erupts seemingly out of nowhere, often in distant places—Indonesia, Guatemala, Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur—where ethnic conflict or hatred is said to have spun out of control. So we can do little about it. Bill Clinton said as much while Serbs were slaughtering Bosnians: "Until these folks get tired of killing each other, bad things will continue to happen."

Perhaps we fail to prevent genocides not because they can't be stopped, and not just because we lack the will to stop them, but because we have misunderstood their nature. Perhaps if we understood genocide properly, a feasible path to stopping this scourge of humanity would become apparent. It may seem bold to say that we have not understood genocide. But, after studying the subject for decades, that is the conclusion I have reached. Genocides are so horrifying, so seemingly in defiance of the ordinary rhythms of social life, so threatening to what we believe we know about ourselves and the world—so out of this world—that we don't think clearly about them. We need to start over and rethink their every aspect: What they are. How they begin. How and why they end. Why they unfold as they do. Why victims are chosen. Why the killers kill. And, most of all, what we can do to stop them.

Even something as fundamental as the real extent of the problem is unknown. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, mass murderers have killed more, perhaps many more, than 100 million people—a much greater number than have died as a consequence of conventional military operations. So genocide is, by this fundamental measure, *worse* than war. Furthermore, people tend to think of our era's mass slaughters—of Armenians, Jews, Kurds, Bosnians, Tutsis, Kosovars, and Darfuris (not to mention recent history's long list of less-well-known mass murders)—as discrete, unusual events. This is wrong: Large-scale mass murder is a systemic feature of modern states and the international system, and that is how we should begin to treat it.

The foundational problem, in fact, is not even genocide. Genocide, however we define it, is but one expression of a broader and more fundamental phenomenon: eliminationism.

Political and social conflicts among groups exist in all human societies. In many societies, groups come to be seen as deleterious to the well-being of the majority or, sometimes, a powerful minority. How this happens and the character of the pernicious qualities projected onto such groups vary enormously. When it does, people can deem the perniciousness of such populaces to be so great that they want to neutralize them by eliminating the group or by destroying its capacity to inflict putative harm. So they employ any of the five principal means of elimination: forced transformation, repression, expulsion, prevention of reproduction, or extermination. But, whatever means they choose, the desire and the attempt to *eliminate* peoples or groups should be understood as the core problem.

Precisely because these eliminationist means are functional equivalents, perpetrators typically use several of them simultaneously. The Turks did so for the Armenians. The Germans did so for the Jews. The Sudanese have done so for their victims, and so did the Serbs. Alisa Muratčauš, former president of the Association of Concentration Camp Torture Survivors in Sarajevo, explains that the Serbs "aimed to eliminate all Bosnian people." Yet they used a variety of means: "Some people will be expelled to another country, a Western country. Some people would be killed. Some people will be [kept] alive for maybe [the Serbs'] personal needs. Who knows? Maybe like slavery."

Whenever we see these large-scale violent assaults, such as expulsions or incarcerations mixed together with killing, we should immediately recognize them as being eliminationist assaults (which could also expand into much larger-scale killing) and respond to them with all the vigor that we ought to apply to genocides. And we should certainly not sit on our hands with pointless debates about definitions—does it qualify as genocide?—as we have done with the former Yugoslavia and Darfur. We should realize that the non-lethal aspects of eliminationist assaults are as critical to combat as the killing itself. Appreciating this helps to make clear that the problem we are confronting is even more vast and more urgent. Genocide and eliminationism should no longer receive the third-rate treatment that they currently do from our politicians: They should be at the core of present and future international policy-making.

Beyond appreciating its breadth, there are two other crucial facts we need to recognize about eliminationism. First, it is a form of politics. Like war, eliminationism is the extension of politics by other means. Political leaders use eliminationist measures to maintain or further power, socially and politically transform a country, defuse a real or putative threat, purify a society according to some ideological blueprint, or achieve any of many other aspirations. Mass murder and elimination are thus politics not in a superficial sense, but at their core, because they are purposeful, calculated acts of leaders meant to achieve political goals. They are an integral part of the repertoire of political leaders, always in principle available, and, in our time, frequently used. It is precisely because eliminationism is such a successful form of politics—those employing it almost always effectively carry out the eliminationist task—that political leaders have adopted it so often during the last century and this one.

Second, even though eliminationism may be grounded in widespread beliefs among groups about the pernicious nature of other people, such hatreds or prejudices are not what unleash eliminationist assaults. Eliminationist assaults are not spontaneous popular outbursts. Like other major state policies requiring large institutional mobilization and regional or nationwide coordination, eliminationism is initiated by one political leader or a small group of leaders, who at a specific moment make a

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discrete decision to expel, kill, or otherwise eliminate the targeted people.

Idi Amin initiated the slaughter of hundreds of thousands in Uganda. Presidents Fernando Romeo Lucas Garcia and José Efraín Ríos Montt were responsible for the mass murder in Guatemala of Mayans under the guise of counterinsurgency. Mengistu Haile Mariam masterminded and initiated the various Ethiopian eliminationist programs. Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge leaders around him instituted the murderous policies that took almost two million Cambodian lives. The Argentinean junta's members started the "dirty war" against their real and imagined enemies. Augusto Pinochet authorized the slaughter of thousands in Chile. Hafez Al Assad gave the order to indiscriminately murder people in Hama. Saddam Hussein orchestrated the annihilation of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis. Slobodan Milošević enacted one Serbian eliminationist onslaught after the next. Théoneste Bagosora, the Rwandan Ministry of Defense's director of services, and a small circle of associates set in motion the comprehensive assault on the Tutsis. Omar Al Bashir and the other political Islamists who run Sudan initiated the mass murder of Darfuris. In none of these cases was the eliminationist assault inevitable. These decision-makers could have decided otherwise. They could have spared innumerable lives.

So why did they decide to do it? Even the most monstrous leaders have also been pragmatic and purposeful politicians. All sought power and all made every effort to keep it. Even when political leaders are—like their followers, who willingly implement their policies—animated by hatred, even when they dehumanize the targeted people, they are still politicians, which means they are still interested in power. They will pursue eliminationist policies only if they believe these policies will succeed at enhancing their own power or furthering cherished goals—that is, only if they believe the benefits to themselves will outweigh the costs. And, more often than not, from Indonesia to Ethiopia to Guatemala to Iraq to Sudan, that is exactly what eliminationist policies have done. This explains why rationally calculating political leaders use such policies so often.

Recognizing that eliminationism—not only its most murderous variant, genocide—is a widespread problem, and that it is a form of politics, and that it is pursued by leaders who believe (almost always correctly) that it will benefit them, how can we respond politically? Can we remove eliminationism from the standard repertoire of policy? In other words, can we save millions of lives?

Past efforts have accomplished little. The 60-year-old U.N. Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide has proven itself almost useless, and the United Nations, as the international community's lead institution, has been a foot-dragging disaster, doing more to enable eliminationist leaders than to stop them. Special tribunals and the International Criminal Court (ICC), all necessary and good, have been too late, too slow, and too partial to be effective—the ICC took more than five years from the start of the Darfur genocide just to issue an unenforceable arrest warrant for Al Bashir! Serious diplomatic efforts have been meager. The occasional military response has been years late. The Responsibility to Protect movement, while promising, remains slow-moving. All in all, the current anti-genocide regime is ad hoc and toothless. In fact, it would be fair to say that, as a practical matter, it doesn't exist. And eliminationism more generally—which can include the expulsion of a vast number of people from their homes—is barely on the international community's radar, meaning that, unless an assault is seen to fit the restricted definition of genocide, it is unlikely that the international community will respond forcefully.

A robust anti-eliminationist system would contain three substantial and interrelated components: prevention, intervention, and punishment. Currently, there is no prevention regime, only infrequent attempts at intervention, and rarely any punishment. All three parts of such a system need to be thought through, but *preventing* eliminationist assaults, more than intervening to end them or punishing the perpetrators after the fact, should be our initial focus.

Prevention works in two ways. First, changing the mindset of leaders and creating conditions that make eliminationism utterly unworkable removes it from the toolkit of political leaders so that pursuing such politics does not even occur to them. Democratic institutions do this effectively. Mass murder and elimination have ever more become domestic rather than international matters. And not only do today's democracies not practice such domestic politics, but, it is fair to say, eliminationism is not even a consideration for their leaders. A world of democracies would be a world without mass murder, or, at worst, with an enormously reduced incidence of it. Eliminationism today is the practice of dictatorships, and today's dictatorships should all be considered proto-eliminationist regimes. Even when their leaders and dominant groups are not undertaking eliminationist assaults, precisely because they are always at least implicitly threatened by the groups and people they are repressing, they are at any moment not that far away from ramping up their repressive measures to eliminationist levels of violence.

Second, and far more immediately effective and doable, is radically altering the cost-benefit calculus of political leaders and the immediate subordinates upon whom they rely, to make the price of eliminationist politics so costly that leaders will not opt for it. A critical feature of international politics is generally underestimated: the capacity of political leaders to learn. In today's globalized world, knowledge of what is possible or impossible, permissible or impermissible is rapidly disseminated and absorbed. Until now political leaders have learned that the politics of eliminationism is a politics of impunity. We could teach them and the world the opposite. If we did, we could rapidly end or greatly reduce the threat posed by eliminationism.

Let's look at two possible measures for raising the price of eliminationism. If leaders knew that initiating eliminationist assaults would turn them into permanent outlaws—that is, the legal doctrine of *Hostis Humani Generis* (enemies of humanity), until now applied to pirates, would apply to them for the rest of their lives—and, if they understood that they would be relentlessly hunted until they were brought to justice, their cost-benefit calculations would radically change. If not just leaders but all their high-ranking civilian and military subordinates were similarly declared international outlaws (by dint of serving in institutions that, according to international law, can clearly be deemed criminal organizations) and subject to the same penalties as the political leaders, those leaders would calculate their chances of enlisting their subordinates, and relying on their cooperation, very differently.

Of course, as the ICC has shown, indicting an eliminationist leader is easier than bringing him to justice. But what if the democratic countries of the world were to adopt a modified version of the United States's Rewards for Justice program—which has led to the capture and killing of major terrorists and, when instituted after the fact, Rwandan genocidaires—guaranteeing that any eliminationist assault would immediately trigger million-dollar bounties being placed on the heads of

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political and military leaders and their high-ranking subordinates? Then the critical conditions of deterrence would be met: A powerful disincentive would be in place, accompanied by a reasonable certitude on the part of anyone contemplating the deed that the disincentive will be applied to him. No political leader, wanting the good life, would want to be wanted dead or alive. Which dictator in a poor country could even be sure his own bodyguards would not turn on him? The Obama administration, like earlier Democratic and Republican administrations, offers such bounties for terrorists who kill a few dozen or a few thousand people. How can we justify not doing the same when the lives of millions are at stake?

I asked Rwandan Minister of Justice Tharcisse Karugarama—who has steeped himself in the problem of genocide and knows more about it than just about any other public figure in the world—whether a *guarantee* that anyone initiating genocide would be hunted down would have prevented the Rwandan genocide and would be effective in preventing future mass slaughters. "Definitely, definitely, definitely, definitely, many times definitely," he replied, then explained: "If people knew that at the end of the day they'll be the losers, they'd never invest in a losing enterprise. Because genocide, as you correctly pointed out, is a political enterprise, it's a political game. But again, it's a power play, it's wealth, it's everything. So, if people involved knew at the end of the day they'd be the losers, they would not play the game. That's for sure."

There are other deterrents available as well. Most dictators rely on their militaries to stay in power. If dictators understood that their eliminationist policies would trigger the destruction of their country's military capability, then this also would be a powerful disincentive. Under such a policy, political leaders would quickly learn: If they choose to initiate an eliminationist assault, the world's democracies, led by the United States, would bomb their military bases and forces (steadfastly avoiding population centers and civilian infrastructure). How many dictators would begin an eliminationist assault if they were facing such consequences? Bombing by NATO in 1995 quickly forced Milošević to stop the eliminationist assault on Bosnians. If it had been done three years earlier, when the onslaught began, many tens of thousands of people would not have lost their lives, and hundreds of thousands more would not have been expelled from their homes, raped, or brutalized.

To buttress the deterrent force of such threats, these and other political, diplomatic, and military measures should be communicated to all world leaders and their high-level subordinates by every available means the moment they assume office, democratically or not. Handbooks should be distributed by every major international and regional association (the U.N., NATO, the WTO, the African Union, etc.), spelling out these and other anti-eliminationist measures. Every political leader, cabinet member, and high-ranking military and police official ought to be put on notice: Should you decide to participate in eliminationist assaults or serve eliminationist regimes, this is what awaits you.

Some may say these measures are too costly—referring to money, not lives. But, compared to the cost of allowing mass elimination to take place (or of forcibly inserting ground troops), these steps would actually be relatively inexpensive. The United States alone spent $1.35 billion in the first ten years for Bosnia's reconstruction, and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia has cost more than $1.5 billion.

Others may object that such policies would lead to too much intervention. But these policies are designed to provide effective deterrence—and, if deterrence ever fails, then, with the first intervention, to strengthen deterrence by demonstrating what will happen to the next set of political leaders who initiate an eliminationist assault. The danger in the world today is anything but too much intervention to stop mass murderers. The real problem is getting the world's democracies to intervene at all. So let's focus on trying to get a robust anti-eliminationist system in place, rather than worrying about the hypothetical and unlikely problem of too much intervention—or the practical need to perhaps make occasional exceptions.

Still others may declare that these steps, costly or not, are too radical. But, as with so much thinking about genocide, such vision is clouded: The really radical stance consists of maintaining the status quo, the do-nothingness that has governed international law and politics as we all stand by and watch eliminationist regimes slaughter, expel, and brutalize millions.

If in 1900 you had said that it would be possible to end imperialism, few would have believed you. Imperialism, after all, had been a fact of the human condition for millennia. Likewise if you had said that it would be possible to stop war from being the principal means by which a large percentage of the countries of the world relate to one another. Yet each has occurred. The notion that we could end eliminationism—a phenomenon that has existed as long as humanity—may seem similarly fanciful today. But it is much less unrealistic than it sounds.

Just as it only takes one or a few political leaders to decide to slaughter or expel millions, so too can a few political leaders, a few moral men and women, go a long way toward ending such practices. (These relatively low-cost preventive measures—compared to after-the-fact invasions—also have the virtue of being far more likely to get them to act.) Let's not be content to utter pieties. Let's not wait for the glacially moving international community—centered around the United Nations—to evolve. The matter is urgent. Tens of thousands can die and be brutalized every day. The leaders of a few democracies, or even just the president of the United States, could institute bounties and guarantee the application of force. This would open up a new anti-eliminationist era.

So far, on these matters, Barack Obama has gone in precisely the wrong direction. Instead of attempting to show that there are consequences for eliminationist murdering and expulsions, his administration has taken a soft line toward Al Bashir, one of the worst eliminationists and mass murderers of our time. In doing so, the administration is broadcasting a simple message around the globe, a message being heard by other dictators contemplating similar assaults: You will get away with it. Obama and those serving under him present themselves as people of conscience. So we must ask: With millions of future lives hanging in the balance, how can Obama and his administration fail to devote their considerable political skill and our country's power to ending our age's greatest scourge?

In retrospect, would anyone really disagree that, if such measures could have prevented the Rwandan genocide and the deaths of 800,000, then we should have taken them—regardless of international law's obstructionism and whatever unease we might feel? So how can we say that we shouldn't adopt these same measures to prevent the next Rwanda, and the next one after that? ◆

Daniel Jonah Goldhagen is the author of WORSE THAN WAR: GENOCIDE, ELIMINATIONISM, AND THE ONGOING ASSAULT ON HUMANITY, *from which this piece is adapted.*

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On Lehman's failure: "Lehman was allowed to fail, but the consequence of that failure was that all the rest became too big to fail because nobody—no politician, no regulator—would dare be guilty of causing 'another Lehman.'" *Niall Ferguson*

On this crisis compared to the Great Depression: "Were it not for the creative application of actions at the Fed and in this administration, I think we really could have been looking at that same sort of continuing domino implosion of the financial system, and it would have been an awful, awful circumstance." *Austan Goolsbee*

On the role of regulators and the Fed in the past decade: "We have stood there waving people on, saying 'Build on this model,' knowing that this model was not going to work, either from a profitability perspective or from a business-ethics perspective. … We came up with all sorts of clever intellectual games to justify scale, none of which made sense either from a systemic perspective or from an individual business perspective or from the perspective of government." *Eliot Spitzer*

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Stanley Kauffmann on Films

CHANGE, MORE AND LESS

J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* has been made into a film that, in good measure, is faithful to it. Along with the admiration that obviously drew them to the book, the film-makers had to deal with some heavy data. Coetzee is a Nobel laureate; *Disgrace* won a lofty British award called the Booker Prize; an English newspaper poll lately named *Disgrace* as the best novel of the last twenty-five years. Aesthetically dubious though such tags are, nonetheless the book has been a favorite of many good readers over many years.

It took courage as well as talent to take on that load of prestige. The adapter, Anna-Maria Monticelli, and the director Steve Jacobs, her husband—both Australian—must have known early on of still another problem. In a salient way, the more faithful they were to the book, the greater risk they might be taking. Coetzee's protagonist is a difficult man who, at the start, disdains the approval of others, does what he wants to do, and disregards as far as possible the world's opinion. This is not a pattern for a cinematic hero, no matter how serious the picture. Yet the picture holds to it as long as Coetzee does.

The film-makers had the extraordinary help of John Malkovich in the role. He has previously played characters with at least a touch of tacit superiority, and the qualities of this role almost seem designed to fit what we already know about him. It is the sort of juncture that makes us think the universe was designed so that this actor and this role should some day meet—like Humphrey Bogart in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* or Paul Newman in *The Verdict*. Besides, there is a stylistic kinship, I'd say, between Coetzee and Malkovich. In the author's prose, adjectives are sparse: part of his power is his ability to be both strong and subtle without flourishes. Malkovich's acting, so to speak, also has few adjectives.

DISGRACE
Paladin

THE OTHER MAN
Image Entertainment

David Lurie is a middle-aged professor of literature at a Cape Town university. Twice divorced, he patronizes a particular prostitute every week, and after she becomes unavailable he starts an affair with one of his students, Melanie Isaacs. She is more overwhelmed than impassioned, and evidently she tells others about it. Her boyfriend taunts David; her father complains. The university reacts predictably to the eventual scandal. After an inquiry in which David is both frank and unapologetic, he is allowed to resign.

He is also a writer and composer, and he decides to visit his daughter Lucy in the country, to stay with her a while and work there on a project he has been cherishing—a chamber opera about Byron. Lucy's place is in the mountains, where she has a kennel and a market garden of vegetables and flowers. Her neighbor, a fortyish black man named Petrus, helps her as gardener and dog man. She knows her father's character very well, and she welcomes him to stay with her, writing and composing perhaps, while he thinks about his situation and his future.

Their lives are suddenly and horribly altered one day by a brutal assault. Three black youths kill the dogs, rape Lucy, and try to immolate David. Police steps are taken to apprehend the assailants, with few immediate results. Here follows the most complex and influential passage in the story. Contrary to David's expectation, Lucy does not want to move away from this relatively dangerous region. She says that she would feel defeated and would always carry that defeat with her. Unspoken, too, but perceptible, is some sense of her connection in responsibility with post-apartheid South Africa, heightened by her friendship with Petrus—plus the strangely involving discovery that one of the assailants may be a relative of his. David argues with her: she is determined to stay.

Then, in due course, Lucy finds out that she is pregnant because of the rape. To David's surprise, she wants to keep the child. "Should I choose against the child because of who its father is?" she says. (There is one element missing here from the film that would help. In the novel Lucy is a lesbian, whose partner is off somewhere for a while. This factor gives Lucy's decision to keep the child another dimension.) David moves out of Lucy's house and finds shelter, or something more than that, with a couple not far away, while he tries to absorb all that has happened to and around Lucy and himself. In time, possibly out of a kind of pride in Lucy or even—out of his own experience—some envy of her clarity, David comes to accept her view.

The Australian actress Jessica Haines makes her film debut as Lucy and is immediately winning, with a lovely air of human comprehension. Eric Ebouaney as Petrus is winning and deep. Just in his being, he conveys an almost tribal wisdom, a sense of circumspection, a knowledge of what has gone wrong yet of what can be right. Monticelli has crafted her screenplay with a vitalizing sense of obligation to Coetzee that keeps the film whole. Jacobs, whose first feature this is, treats it with surety. He sometimes

ANTHONY RUSSO

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lets the music get a bit extravagant, but otherwise all is controlled and fluent. In his hands the exteriors, which were shot in South Africa, seem relevant to character decisions.

Disgrace is a drama of metamorphosis—a man's discarding an image of himself that grows increasingly inadequate—yet it is not a primer in ethics. At the beginning David sees himself as a kind of Byronic persona, perhaps tinged by the poet he adores: a creature of impulse rather than discipline. His obdurate behavior at the faculty inquiry, while quite genuine, seems part of a self-portrait he has painted. Ultimately, largely as a result of his experience with Lucy, he reaches the polar extreme from his faculty-meeting behavior in a scene at Melanie's house, with an act of complete self-abasement. Yet his progress throughout is no moral formula. He is too intelligent not to know what is happening to him: he is also too intricate to glory in it completely as a species of salvation. Coetzee's novel makes the most of this contrapuntal texture, and Malkovich realizes it as thoroughly as possible in his consummate performance.

THE OTHER MAN has surprises in its plot, and the film itself is a surprise, though this last surprise is probably not intended. The original story was by the German author Bernhard Schlink (*The Reader*). It was then adapted by two eminent Englishmen, the director-writer Richard Eyre and the playwright-scenarist Charles Wood. I don't know the Schlink original, but it came out at this end as a nice, comfy 1930s picture—the first seventy minutes of it, anyway. Computers and cell phones have been added, but the film is one more triangle story. It deals with that hardy perennial: can a person truly love two people? What good old stuff. The earliest example I can think of is *Wife vs. Secretary*, done in 1936, but it was good old stuff even then. This time it's the husband who searches out a rival. Great. As *The Other Man* starts, it is like settling back in an easy chair.

An English couple have been married for twenty-five years and have a twenty-ish daughter. They are well off, of course: Peter is a corporate executive, Lisa is a successful shoe designer. It is essential for this kind of film that there be no money worries: how could hard-up people have time for these shenanigans? Lisa is suddenly gone from their archetypal English country house—her plans unknown—and Peter, searching for a clue to her whereabouts on her computer, comes across love letters exchanged with another man. We could hardly be less flabbergasted. Not only does the title prepare us: the dovecote air of the opening promises a jolt. Peter follows a clue to Milan, meets the other man—a continental!—and both men are set in place for the plot twists that follow.

Those twists are extreme. They seem the authors' strained attempts at the unexpected, to differ from the usual or predictable endings of so many triangle stories. The Eyre-Wood devices are never anything but that. Yet, though the last twenty minutes or so puzzle us, the preceding seventy minutes have been so pleasant that we are in a forgiving mood.

The pleasure comes in some degree from the Gravity Lite dialogue—as John Van Druten and S. N. Behrman, or Philip Barry, used to spin it out—but a great deal comes from the people who speak it. Peter is played by Liam Neeson; Lisa, by Laura Linney; the other man, Ralph, by Antonio Banderas. As is often the case with exceptional actors, they not only make the dialogue and (most of) the story palatable, they serve as figurative co-authors. They enrich the piece. An early restaurant scene between husband and wife glitters. Later scenes in a Milanese café between the two men are enjoyably symbolic. The café specializes in chess. Ralph doesn't yet know who Peter is, and their chess games take on the aura of investigative duels.

The Other Man reminds us of an incidental but relevant function of film—as calendar. (Linney excepted.) There is something warm, almost familial, about seeing Neeson's face move into middle age; it reminds us of how long we have had the chance to be grateful to him. And Banderas, that bundle of sheer ebullience whom Almodóvar brought us in the 1980s? Now he is a mature man who simply cannot help being charming but who can rely on other resources as well.

Eyre is, besides his films, a veteran theater director, and has doubtlessly helped his actors to refine their work. He has been especially good with Romola Garai, who is movingly importunate as the Peter-Lisa offspring. Eyre has the eye of a good visual chef: he drops in pictorial elements that help the flavor. Milan has never been one of my favorite Italian cities, but Eyre, with his cinematographer, Haris Zambarloukos, has made me think it over. ◆

JED PERL ON ART
THE RESTLESS MEDIUM

I.

MICHAEL FRIED, who shot to intellectual stardom in 1967 with an essay in *Artforum* called "Art and Objecthood," is an intimidating writer. He looks very closely. He has passionate feelings about what he sees. And he shapes his impressions into a theory that fits snugly with all the other theories he has ever had. Whatever his chosen subject—Diderot, Courbet, Manet, Kenneth Noland—he comes up with an interpretation that is as smoothly and tightly constructed as a stainless-steel box. His writing amounts to a set of matching stainless-steel boxes. He puts potential critics on notice that the best they can hope to do is leave a few fingerprints or scratches on these perfectly polished surfaces. And so many people back away. Fried wants us to feel that we could as easily demolish the Great Pyramid of Giza with a pickaxe as successfully question his interpretations of his chosen themes—which now include the art of the camera, in his new book, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*. This is Fried's first extended foray into photography, and although it was a subject of discussion in academic circles even before it appeared, it has not received the more general attention that it deserves. Fried brings audacious arguments to old controversies about the relationship between art and photography. I find the arguments troubling, even wrongheaded, but only a man with a bold, wide-ranging, and fearless mind could have dreamed such stuff up.

WHY PHOTOGRAPHY MATTERS AS ART AS NEVER BEFORE
By Michael Fried
(Yale University Press, 409 pp., $55)

In order to come to terms with this book, we need to back up and see it as but one contribution—a striking one, to be sure—to a much wider discussion about the nature of photography. We tend to forget that photography is very young. While the 170 years that separate us from the medium's invention

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are an eternity in the history of technology, in the history of culture this is a relatively brief period of time. Photography's newness, and its ability, at least in technical terms, constantly to re-invent itself, is one key to its fascination: digitalization, which makes photographic truth seem more porous and changeable than ever before, is its most recent technical re-invention, and Fried discusses it. Then there are the numberless areas in life in which photography plays a role, ranging from family albums to evidence presented at criminal trials to the walls of art galleries and museums. In the years since the medium's inception, photography has been said to be classical, spiritual, mystical, straightforward, primitive, experimental, surreal, empirical, austere, reticent, impersonal, romantic, informal, reliable, unreliable, and downright misleading—and that is only the beginning.

Fried wants to set contemporary photography squarely within the high art traditions. While he is by no means the first writer to make a connection between photography and abstract painting, his theoretical assumptions will strike many as unexpected if not fairly incredible. His book, full of daring conceptual pyrotechnics, suggests an impatience with photography's wonderfully messy history—a desire to define the nature of photography once and for all, or at least the nature of the recent photographs that interest him. Perhaps this rage for order is inevitable, given all the attention that photography has been receiving in the marketplace, in the museums, and in the seminar rooms. There has been a growing sense that values need to be assigned and lineages need to be established. Photography, however, has a way of refusing to settle down. In *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, Fried is trying to contain all photography's unruly powers; but it is not easy—it is not possible—to lock photography in a conceptual stainless-steel box. Willfulness, which has always driven the modern adventure in the arts, meets its match in photography, a medium with a will of its own. There will never be a Mondrian of photography, because photography is inherently impure.

The strange thing about Michael Fried is that he ought to recognize the extent to which photography is utterly unlike painting, considering that he emerged in the late 1960s as an avatar of painterly purity with his strenuous defenses of Kenneth Noland, Morris Louis, and Jules Olitski. Unfortunately, the man's pride in his own theoretical prowess may prevent him from seeing that other people have been here before. He appears oblivious to the fate of earlier efforts to develop a taxonomy of photography that would match the modern taxonomy of painting, which were encouraged by John Szarkowski, the legendary curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art from 1962 to 1991. The fascination of Szarkowski, who was himself a photographer and is sometimes now dismissed as a stiff-backed aesthete, was that for all his desire to set photography securely in an ivory tower adjacent to the one where Matisse and Mondrian dwell, he loved photography too much to overlook its incendiary impurity. Given how little is known about Atget, the early twentieth-century Parisian photographer whom Szarkowski worshipped, Szarkowski's encyclopedic studies of Atget's work had a way of almost inevitably shifting attention from the enigmatic photographer to the photographs themselves, and could thereby lead straight to postmodernism's obsession with the death, or at least the disappearance, of the author. The power of black and white photography to re-order reality is treasured by any antediluvian modernists who still happen to be kicking, but the unruliness of the world that photography reveals inspires postmodernists and post-postmodernists of every imaginable stripe.

Photography is not a medium that works in a single way or can be understood from one perspective. There are curators and critics who know this. Jeff Rosenheim's *Walker Evans and the Picture Postcard* (Steidl), the catalogue of a show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, wreaks havoc with conventional ideas about the relationship between high and low, exploring the close similarities between Evans's austerely elegant street scenes and picture postcards, a sort of commercial folk art, which this revered modernist photographer collected. Richard Benson's *The Printed Picture*, the catalogue of a show at the Museum of Modern Art, plunges deep into the shifting character of photographic technologies, ranging from daguerreotypes and early paper prints to innumerable different photomechanical processes and digital prints of all kinds. What Benson presents is a dazzling demonstration of photography's mongrel nature. Photography is the most permissive medium. It is certainly more accommodating than painting when it comes to finding a place for humor, kitsch, and all manner of eccentricity. This is why, as Susan Sontag pointed out a generation ago in *On Photography*, "it is the one art that has managed to carry out the grandiose, century-old threats of a Surrealist takeover of the modern sensibility, while most of the pedigreed candidates have dropped out of the race."

Anybody interested in this tangled story of dueling modernists and postmodernists would do well to begin by looking at *Photography Theory* (Routledge), an anthology edited by James Elkins that brings together essays and comments by many figures in the art-history world. There is a good deal of talk about the solidification of photography's status as an art in the 1960s, as if this were not a campaign that began deep in the nineteenth century. John Szarkowski is not exactly an admired figure here. Michael Fried is not neglected, although the spectacle of this old modernist, vintage 1970, giving photography renewed high-modern legitimacy does not quite fit the program, at least not as everybody sees it. What we do hear is a good deal of talk about the "indexicality" of photography, by which postmoderns and conceptualists mean to emphasize the status of the photograph as anti-artistic or extra-artistic, a mere copy or tracing of the world, subject mostly to social, psychological, and political analysis. There is even a word for people who persist in insisting on the freestanding vision of the photographer: they suffer from "indexophobia."

The knitting of photography into every aspect of our lives knows no end. Some of the contributors to *Photography Theory* admit to some difficulty in grappling with a medium that appears to have no fixed borders. Even the theorists can have a tough time theorizing photography, because it refuses to sit still. The snapshot, which just the other day was the most ubiquitous of photographic expressions—and was the subject of an exhibition, "The Art of the American Snapshot," at the National Gallery—can now look old hat alongside the iPhone, where perpetual self-documentation comes in lavish color and sharp focus, the images as rich and vibrant as a photograph by Nan Goldin or Stephen Shore. Much of the enduring fascination of photography depends on the extent to which its function and its aesthetic remain undefined, and dependent, in spite of everything that has already been said, on competing arguments and apprehensions.

What other medium, after all, is of equal interest to criminologists, mall rats, grandparents, and aesthetes? And

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this multiplicity of audiences is in turn woven into photography's power. For a mandarin of modernism such as Walker Evans, the populism of photography provided access to a wider world. And among the curators who nowadays present photography in the museums, there is sometimes an assumption that the public will particularly favor galleries devoted to the products of the camera because they do not look entirely unlike the pictures that museumgoers take with their own digital equipment.

II.

A central development in photography in the past decade has been the widespread success, commercial and critical, of extremely large formats. Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth, Jeff Wall, and Thomas Demand are among the leading figures of this new gigantism. Well before the appearance of Fried's book, which includes discussions of each of these photographers, some critics and curators were suggesting that photography was in the process of eclipsing painting as an object of primary interest to visitors to galleries and museums. Of course it is true that large photographic works are hardly unprecedented. Romy Golan's new book, *Muralnomad: The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927–1957* (Yale University Press), has much to say about the oversized photomurals that were produced in Europe, including works by Léger, Charlotte Perriand, Josep Renau, and others for the International Exposition in Paris in 1937. But these works, as Golan explains, were viewed as accompaniments to architecture and as educational and ideological tools, rather than as freestanding works of art. And it is precisely as freestanding works of art that Gursky, Struth, Wall, and Demand ask us to regard the enormous photographs—some of them well over eight feet wide—that they have been exhibiting in recent years.

Whatever one may think of the work of these men—I find Wall the only genuinely interesting figure in this company—their prominence marks a dramatic turn in the nature of photography as it is seen and understood. Until recently, photography, including the work of such avant-gardists as Robert Frank and Peter Hujar, was by and large intimate in size, designed for the kind of close-up looking associated with the graphic arts: its images were related to the scale of a book or a magazine page. But no more. Fried's book is essentially an explanation of why the work of Gursky or Struth deserves a place on the museum wall next to the canvases of Morris Louis and some other artists he admires.

The problem is that Fried does not deal with the most fundamental issues that his study raises. He tells us that he is interested in "the emergence of large-scale, tableau-sized photographs that by virtue of their size demand to be hung on gallery walls in the manner of easel paintings, and in other respects as well aspire to what might be loosely called the rhetorical, or beholder-addressing, significance of paintings." But he tends to confuse aspiration with realization. And he never really demonstrates why size, in and of itself, is somehow a characteristic of painting. Fried is a canny writer; he knows how to use suggestive language and the testimony of other writers to elide any problems with his argument. Much is made of something called the "tableau form," as if introducing a little bit of French will paper over any questions. But behind all the elegant footwork, what Fried's argument seems to come down to is comically simple. It is that a very big photograph in full color, when hung on the wall, is inherently like a painting, or at least has some of the qualities of a painting.

This is absurd. I do not see how somebody as sophisticated as Fried could

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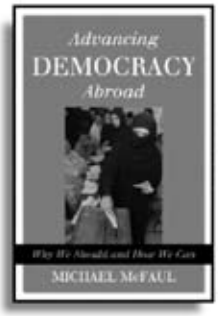

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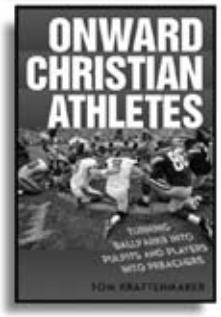

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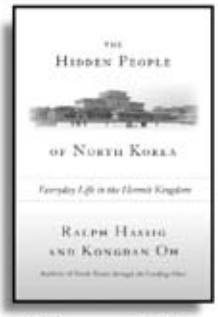

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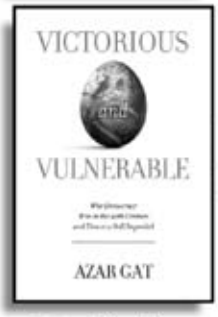

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possibly imagine that largeness is in any sense a particular quality of painting. If that were the case, billboards would by their very nature approach the condition of painting—a thought that might please James Rosenquist, but leaves me cold. Many great paintings—works by Van Eyck, Watteau, Chardin, and Corot—are no more than a couple of feet high or wide. The essential nature of painting has nothing to do with size and everything to do with internal scale, with the power that pictorial relationships have to hold the eye, and thus to establish the painting's significance on the wall. This quality of internal scale—what might be called pictorial monumentality—matters more than size in and of itself. And yet Fried, because he happens to admire some very large paintings by Morris Louis and others, falls into the trap of assuming that because a photograph is six feet high or six feet wide, it can begin to claim some of the characteristics of painting. I would argue that the opposite is more likely true. It is precisely because a photograph is not handmade that the essential character of scale in painting—the relationship of the brushstrokes or other marks to the parts of the picture and to the image as a whole—is absent. A large photograph cannot be experienced—not viscerally, anyway—in the way a large painting can.

The photographer Duane Michals, in a comic little book called *Foto Follies: How Photography Lost its Virginity on the Way to the Bank* (Steidl), says of the creators of these "giant faux tableaux" that they are "closet-size queens," and he is not far from the truth. Fried seems to have fallen for their act. Michals's little escapade, published in 2006, is hilariously funny, unabashedly politically incorrect, and deadly serious about the problems with the new photography. A mix of poetry, invective, and Michals's own remakes of works by Cindy Sherman, Gursky, the video artist Pipilotti Rist, and the painter Gerhard Richter, the book argues that what we have here is little more than a coarsening of older photographic conventions. "Never trust any photograph so large that it can only fit inside a museum," he writes. Of Gursky, he complains that "an eight-by-ten-inch photograph by Robert Frank can be heroic. An eight-by-ten-foot Gursky is just a billboard with pretensions." Some will say that this is just sour grapes, that Michals, a star in the photographic firmament, may now feel sidelined; and there is an irony in Michals—who exhibited for years at the Sidney Janis Gallery, known for its exhibits of Mondrian and Giacometti and the Abstract Expressionists—complaining about photographers elbowing into the art context. Yet Michals's deeper point is very important: photography as a form allows artists particular kinds of freedom and latitude.

Michals's own best work, designed as much for the pages of a book as for the gallery wall, uses the camera eye to create a mixture of storytelling, theater, and romantic obsession that is casual, unpredictable, always a little off-kilter. In two recent books—*Salute, Walt Whitman* and *The Adventures of Constantine Cavafy*—he honors the work of great poets with sequences of photographs that echo the themes of their poems or explore the poets' amorous emotions. In *The Adventures of Constantine Cavafy*, the poet is played by the actor Joel Grey, who is seen in a variety of situations, in a bedroom or a café, ogling or engaging with the men of his dreams. Michals likes to contrast a simplicity of means with an abundance of feeling. Grey is not just a model. He is used for his acting prowess. The photographs are as much a Grey performance as a Michals performance. Grey is there to put the beefcake side of these images into perspective.

For Michals, the photographs do not stand alone. In these beautifully produced books, done with Twin Palms Publishers—the reproductions are deep-toned, fine-grained—it is the unfolding of groups of photographs that counts, and their juxtaposition with pages of text, generally inscribed in Michals's own blocky handwriting. Perhaps the most striking image in the Cavafy book is in the epilogue, "The poet decorates his muse with verse." Here a young man, bare-chested, sits in a bed, his torso scattered with sheets of paper on which the poet's poems are inscribed. Is this picture-making, or story-telling, or some combination of the two? It is difficult to say. What Michals would probably say is that it is its own genre: photography, rather than "art."

The extent to which photography is unlike painting, and appears to derive from different traditions, is hard to deny. François Brunet's *Photography and Literature* (Reakation Books) is one of a number of recent studies that have explored the degree to which photography seems to satisfy many of the same appetites that are satisfied by works of reportage, history, and even fiction. In part, this is simply to say that the photograph is less closely related to painting than to the graphic arts, where the illustrative function is paramount. The relationship between the photograph and the book—and thus between the photograph and literary and narrative and illustrative conventions—was there from the very beginning. William Henry Fox Talbot, the inventor of the paper photographic print in England, devoted much of his energy to a photographically illustrated book called *The Pencil of Nature* (note that a pencil rather than a paintbrush is in the title). And it is extraordinary how many of the essential achievements in the history of photography are photographically illustrated books of one kind or another: Alexander Gardner's *Photographic Sketchbook of the War* (1866), Thomas Annan's *The Old Closes and Streets of Glasgow* (1872), John Thomson's *Street Life in London* (1878), Albert Renger-Patzsch's *Die Welt ist Schön* (1928), and Brassaï's *Paris de Nuit* (1933).

Brunet sees photography as related to an evolving romantic sensibility, with literature and photography developing "in solidarity rather than in opposition . . . in the same large historical period, broadly identified as modern, driven by the same general Romantic aspiration to the emancipation of individual consciousness." And the romanticism of photography, in this definition, is by no means inconsistent with photography's scientific aspects.

III.

Jeff Wall is surely the most interesting and significant artist among the new generation of photographers who work in huge formats, and he has explored the relationship between photography and literature in several works. It is a testament to the sensitivity of Fried's eye that in his new book he focuses on works by this gifted Canadian, whose photographs often evince an intellectual complexity that is engaging and inspiriting. Wall's images, frequently very large, are presented as transparencies backlit by light boxes, and they explore photography's divergent affinities for documentary truth, narrative elaboration, and fantastical surprise.

A magnificent avidity fuels the variety of Wall's achievement. He is interested in older artisanal practice, reflected in his study of an artist, Adrian Walker, in the act of drawing, and in the work called *Restoration*, which represents the conservation of a vast, nineteenth-century painted panorama. His re-imaginings of compositions by Delacroix, Manet, and Hokusai are playful and inventive riffs on older structural strategies. The pleasure of Wall's work lies in our encounters with

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an artistic imagination that is on overdrive, packed with ideas. I am excited by his excitement, which is more than I can say about most of the artists in Fried's book. Thomas Ruff's static, stagy, oversized photographic portraits are utterly inexplicable, as far as I am concerned. And Thomas Demand's vast studies of interiors, which are photographs not of real places but of paper models of real places, amount to an elaborate parlor trick, nothing more.

One of Wall's most appealing works is *After "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue*. When I first saw it at the Marian Goodman Gallery a few years ago, I felt I was responding not so much to a freestanding work of art, but to a marvelous commentary on Ellison's novel—a detailed photographic reconstruction of the narrator's retreat from the world into a basement illuminated by the 1,369 light bulbs that he powers by stealing wattage from the electric company. I cannot imagine a more interesting demonstration of the mysterious synergy between photography and literature. The obsessive detail that Wall has brought to his reconstruction of the narrator's subterranean home matches the intricacy of Ellison's fictional imagination. Something in the honey and mahogany tones of Wall's work is true to Ellison's dark, rich world.

The boldness of Wall's picture, which is close to eight feet wide, gives naturalism a mythic impact. Wall is attuned to the bewitching mix of allegory and realism that characterizes Ellison's singular exploration of mid-twentieth-century America. Although some would now suggest that the success of art photographers, especially Wall, in interpreting literary themes means that painters might as well avoid literary sources, I do not think that this is the case. Kitaj and Balthus responded to literature in recent years with magnificent results. And Balthus's grievously under-appreciated late work *A Midsummer Night's Dream* evinces a speculative and imaginative freedom quite different from Wall's encounter with Ellison. What is fascinating in Wall's case is that the anti-painterliness of photography pushes him into a particular kind of engagement, into something closer to commentary or exegesis than poetic response.

After "Invisible Man" is a considerable accomplishment, and I entirely concur with Fried's admiration. From what Fried says, he and Wall have in recent years formed a sort of mutual admiration society. I do not know either man, but I can see that they are both intensely curious and intelligent people, and their shared pleasure in the history of art and perception must be immense. It would be invigorating to listen in on a conversation between them. They share a fascination with early modern pictorial practices, which were the subject of Fried's influential book *Absorption and Theatricality*, published in 1980. And I can well understand Fried's excitement in watching Wall respond to the images of self-absorbed individuals in works by Chardin that interest Fried.

But alarm bells start to go off when Fried writes that "the connection between us is part of the argument of this book." The problem is that Fried is constitutionally incapable of saying what he sees in or feels about a particular work of art or a particular artist and leaving it at that. He must proceed to demonstrate that his interest in this one thing fits perfectly with his interest in everything else—that his theories about art in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries turn out, lo and behold, to go perfectly with his theories about photography right now. Given Fried's intellectual prowess, the process has its fascinations. The man knows how to plot an argument. He has also written one of the strangest and most self-regarding books I have read. Has there ever been a book in which the author refers so

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insistently to his own previous essays, books, and ideas?

Fried is very clear about what he wants to do. He wants to present not only interpretations of individual works and artists, but also an "account of the larger project of much contemporary art photography." And this project, or so Fried believes, turns out to be a magnificent affirmation of his own core convictions as a critic and a historian. Since the 1960s, Fried has been arguing that modern painting is characterized by an unto-itselfness, a turning away from overt appeals to the viewer. The intricacy of his arguments suggests the ritualized beliefs of a secret society. Among the initiates, little else matters. Among the unwashed public, none of it matters at all. For our purposes, it is enough to say that the catechism goes something like this. The "absorption" that characterizes certain eighteenth-century paintings gives way in Manet to something called "facingness," a radical reversal, but also a continuation of this interest in keeping the viewer at a distance. As for works that set up a less clearly determined relationship with the viewer, they may be guilty of a deadly sin that Fried refers to as "theatricality." He also has a great deal to say about something called "objecthood," which is very bad.

My own feeling is that there is good theatricality in art and bad theatricality in art, and that there are masterpieces of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in which the figures in the paintings look away from us and masterpieces in which the figures confront us directly. True, there are Chardins in which the protagonists disregard us, but what of his late pastel portraits? And what could be more sublimely theatrical than one of Ingres's portraits of a Parisian society woman? And isn't there an element of objecthood—a sense of an object that we can encounter in a variety of ways—about Brancusi's perfectly crafted enigmas? I can already hear Fried groaning at my ignorance and obtuseness. I have been a bad, inattentive student. He will want to send me back for a tutorial. He wants to give everybody a tutorial, which is why he comes back to these arguments on almost every page of his book. In the eighteen-page concluding section, the title of his essay "Art and Objecthood" is mentioned, by my count, twelve times. (The book's index does not accurately reflect this.)

In the end, Fried's hair-raisingly elaborate arguments may come down to little more than the old and perfectly useful idea that modern art tends to be detached from the viewer, and to create its own freestanding laws and logic. Fried's bitter decades-old quarrel with the Minimalists, whom he accuses of endangering these ideas, need not concern us here. (Suffice it to say that, yes, Carl Andre makes stupid objects, but Donald Judd at his best is a rapturously convincing modernist.) In *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, Fried wants to convince us that the work of Gursky, Wall, Struth, Demand, and others is a re-affirmation of his preferred brand of modern art. When the figures in these photographs turn away from us, they are involved in "absorption," thus re-affirming Fried's version of high modernism. When they face us, they turn out to be echoing Manet's "facingness," which one might think is the reverse of absorption, but turns out to be a way to hold the viewer off through confrontation, so once again these photographers are re-affirming Fried's high modernism. There is an *Alice in Wonderland* aspect to this reasoning.

I WOULD NOT WANT to belittle the sophistication of Fried's thought. But if you can wade through the bewildering intricacy of his approach, with its tortuous expositions of passages from Hegel, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger, the argument turns out to be rather mundane. Many people have seen in the new oversized photography echoes of mid-twentieth-century abstraction—of Pollock's drip paintings, when Gursky presents an image with lots of little figures; or of Newman's singular expanses of color, when a photograph by Gursky or Demand is pretty much all red or all yellow. I find these comparisons facile. I wonder if anybody who has actually looked at the intimacy of one of Pollock's painted surfaces could find any relationship with Gursky's sleek, graphic impersonality. But Fried is not troubled by such issues. He is too busy proving how the anti-theatricality and absorption of Wall and Gursky and Demand accord with his own view of the great tradition in modern painting, even as he is shooting poison darts at those who mistakenly believe that the new photography has something to do with Minimalism, Fried's old enemy.

Fried is prepared for what he calls "facile" criticism of his new book. He explains that he is indeed "preoccupied" with his own ideas, and "for the simple reason that they seem to me to hold the key to much . . . in the pictorial arts of the past 250 years." He goes on to say that "it would be useful if readers impatient with what I have done were to feel compelled to offer superior interpretations of their own." OK, then. My answer is simple. I do not see the need for some "key" to the pictorial arts of the past two and a half centuries. And I do not see the need for an interpretation of recent photography that links it tightly to earlier developments in painting. It is a mistake to imagine that the finest thought is the most elaborate or labyrinthine thought. I have heard people who know a great deal about painting and who know that Fried's theories are suspect speak almost apologetically about their inability to get with his program. They worry that they are not smart enough to grapple with his ideas, when the truth may be that they are too smart to get tripped up by all his fancy footwork.

Behind Fried's account of modern art is the assumption that what artists do, or what the most important artists do, is a response to "problems" or "issues" in earlier art. In this sense he remains a disciple of Clement Greenberg, with whom he was closely associated early in his career. What Fried sets out to do in *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, from its title on, is to demonstrate that recent photography fits tightly into the history of painting, or at least into the view of the history of painting that Fried happens to favor. I do not understand why this matters. And I do not understand how Fried can be so unperturbed by the profound and fundamental difference between the two media—namely that painting is made by hand, inch by inch. (Fried writes admiringly of Gertrude Stein's wonderful essay "Pictures," but completely misunderstands it.) When Fried attempts a comparison between a Jeff Wall photograph that he especially likes—*Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation*—and the work of Morris Louis, this formalist critic can sound weirdly whimsical. Does Fried really imagine that there is some meaningful relationship "between the liquid flow of Louis's color rivulets and the washing of the windows in *Morning Cleaning*"?

WHATEVER VALUE overarching ideas have for the history of painting, they are utterly unsuited to the history of photography, which is by its very nature promiscuous and outrageously pluralistic. Jeff Wall's best work, especially *After "Invisible Man,"* is remarkable precisely to the extent that

ANTHONY RUSSO

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it eludes all known genres, in painting and in photography. It defines its own idiosyncratic image world, rather like Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* defines its own idiosyncratic literary world. Why does Fried need to shove Wall's work into some known category? Isn't there something simpleminded about Fried, which is disguised by the intellectual bravado that pushes him to prove that everything fits neatly together?

When Fried writes toward the end of his book about the photographs of Bernd and Hilla Becher, whose studies of indigenous architectural forms have been made into a series of splendid picture books, he tortures us again with his old battles with the Minimalists, and once again rehearses his objections to "objecthood," as if he were saving the Bechers from some threat that I cannot really see exists. Naturally, Fried wants to talk about the presentation of the Bechers' photographs in groupings in galleries, because that is how they most neatly fit into his obsessive concern with certain pictorial traditions. But aren't the Bechers' photographs most happily studied in the books that they have produced, where we are invited to explore their encyclopedic studies of building types, including water towers and cooling towers and timbered houses in various countries? Why this need for theory? Is it not obvious that the Bechers' work is a latter-day outgrowth of the New Objectivity that shaped German photography after World War I? Isn't their work best appreciated in that company, and compared with different but related works such as Albert Renger-Patzsch's *Die Welt ist Schön* and E. O. Hoppe's too little appreciated *Deutsche Arbeit*?

Michael Fried's desire to nail down the nature of photography, or at least of certain recent photographs, is essentially at odds with the spirit of photography, which encourages a blurring of distinctions and a multiplying of implications. Geoffrey Batchen's valuable book *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*, published a decade ago, finds these vitalizing confusions in the very beginnings of the medium, which he sees as a product of the Romantic mood of the early nineteenth century. Batchen quotes Coleridge—a friend of Thomas Wedgwood, one of the photographic pioneers—saying that all artistic endeavors are an effort "to make the external internal, the internal external, to make Nature thought and thought Nature." Surely there is something in the delirious paradoxes of this remark that feels right for any period in the history of photography, which is always both a form of experience to which we respond viscerally and a form of knowledge from which we expect precise information.

The prolix nature of photography—the extent to which it can be high and low, public and private, romantic and realist—is the last thing one wants to lose sight of now, when photography is more admired in the museums and the universities than ever before. While Duane Michals is going a little too far when he bids us "never trust any photograph so large that it can only fit inside a museum," there is reason to believe that the canonization of photography may well endanger the scrappy pragmatism that has always been photography's glory. The best way to read *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* is as a cautionary tale. ◆

Lawrence Lessig
AGAINST TRANSPARENCY

The perils of openness in government.

I.

In 2006, the Sunlight Foundation launched a campaign to get members of Congress to post their daily calendars on the Internet. "The Punch-Clock Campaign" collected pledges from ninety-two candidates for Congress, and one of them was elected. I remember when the project was described to me by one of its developers. She assumed that I would be struck by its brilliance. I was not. It seemed to me that there were too many legitimate reasons why someone might not want his or her "daily official work schedule" available to anyone with an Internet connection. Still, I didn't challenge her. I was just coming into the "transparency movement." Surely these things would become clearer, so to speak, later on.

In any case, the momentum was on her side. The "transparency movement" was about to achieve an extraordinary victory in the election of Barack Obama. Indeed, practically nobody any longer questions the wisdom in Brandeis's famous remark—it has become one of the reigning clichés of the transparency movement—that "sunlight is … the best of disinfectants." Like the decision to go to war in Iraq, transparency has become an unquestionable bipartisan value.

And not just in politics. If health care reform ever emerges from Congress, it is certain to spread nationally a project to require doctors to reveal to an Internet-linked database any financial interests they may have in any drug company or device manufacturer. Type the name of any doctor into the database, and a long list of consulting contracts, stock ownership, and paid speaking arrangements will be returned to you, presumably to help you avoid doctors with too many conflicting loyalties, and to steer you to doctors who have themselves steered clear of conflicts.

How could anyone be against transparency? Its virtues and its utilities seem so crushingly obvious. But I have increasingly come to worry that there is an error at the core of this unquestioned goodness. We are not thinking critically enough about where and when transparency works, and where and when it may lead to confusion, or to worse. And I fear that the inevitable success of this movement—if pursued alone, without any sensitivity to the full complexity of the idea of perfect openness—will inspire not reform, but disgust. The "naked transparency movement," as I will call it here, is not going to inspire change. It will simply push any faith in our political system over the cliff.

The naked transparency movement marries the power of network technology to the radical decline in the cost of collecting, storing, and distributing data. Its aim is to liberate that data, especially government data, so as to enable the public to process it and understand it better, or at least differently.

The most obvious examples of this new responsibility for disclosure are data about the legislative process: the demand, now backed by the White House, that bills be posted to the Internet at least twenty-four hours before they are voted upon, or that video of legislative hearings and floor debate be freed from the proprietary control of one (easily

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disciplined) entity such as C-SPAN. The most dramatic examples so far are public data from executive agencies: the website Data.gov is just beginning to assemble an extraordinary collection of "high-value datasets" from the executive branch, all available in standard open formats, and free for the taking.

Without a doubt, the vast majority of these transparency projects make sense. In particular, management transparency, which is designed to make the performance of government agencies more measurable, will radically improve how government works. And making government data available for others to build upon has historically produced enormous value—from weather data, which produces more than $800 billion in economic value to the United States, to GPS data, liberated originally by Ronald Reagan, which now allows cell phones to instantly report (among other essential facts) whether Peets or Starbucks is closer.

But that is not the whole transparency story. There is a type of transparency project that should raise more questions than it has—in particular, projects that are intended to reveal potentially improper influence, or outright corruption. Projects such as the one that the health care bill would launch—building a massive database of doctors who got money from private interests; or projects such as the ones (these are the really sexy innovations for the movement) to make it trivially easy to track every possible source of influence on a member of Congress, mapped against every single vote that the member has made. These projects assume that they are seeking an obvious good. No doubt they will have a profound effect. But will the effect of these projects—at least on their own, unqualified or unrestrained by other considerations—really be for the good? Do we really want the world that they righteously envisage?

With respect to data about campaign contributions, the history of transparency is long. Disclosure requirements for federal elections are a century old next year. For more than three decades, we have known the names of everyone who gives significant amounts to a federal campaign. Or at least we have "known" them in the sense that if you hustled yourself to a government file cabinet, you could discover who contributed what—often months after the election, and often with the cabinet located far from any convenient place. To this day, practical matters work against practical access. In the Senate, for example, those names are reported to the FEC the old-fashioned way—on paper. Staffers for senators collect the data in sophisticated computer programs that make it simple to manage efficiently the most valuable data for any political campaign. When it comes time to report the data that they have collected, however, they print the data on paper, forcing FEC staffers to re-enter it into FEC databases. This process takes time, giving senators a comfortable window at the end of any campaign to secure last- minute funding to avoid defeat with minimal scrutiny.

The hope of the naked transparency movement is to change this. Through better code—in better legislative rules and in better technology—its aim is to make it trivially easy to get access to records suggesting influence, and then link those records automatically to the possible influence that they suggest. Consider, for example, an early instance of this work, presented in a recent report by Maplight.org, analyzing the House vote on the cap-and-trade bill. Titled "How Money Watered Down the Climate Bill," the report enumerates a long list of correlations between money given and results produced. In a section labeled "Amendment to gut the whole bill," for example, the report states: "Each legislator voting Yes … received an average of $37,700 from the Oil & Gas, Coal Mining and Nuclear Energy industries between 2003 and 2008, more than three times as much as the $11,304 received by each legislator voting No." In a section labeled "Oil and gas giveaway," describing an amendment to "increase eligibility for industrial polluters like oil and gas refiners to receive carbon allowances," the report states that "the Oil & Gas industry gave an average of $72,119 to Energy & Commerce Committee members from 2003 [to] 2008." And in a section labeled "Redefining renewable biomass," the report describes an amendment "to broaden the definition of renewable biomass [which the League of Conservation Voters said] would have removed critical safeguards that prevent habitat on our nation's public and private forests from being plowed up": "Energy & Commerce Committee members who voted Yes on the Walden amendment received an average of $25,745 each from the Forestry and Paper Products industry, ten times as much as the $2,541 received, on average, by each member voting No."

This is a crude but powerful beginning. It points to an obvious future. Even this clarity took an enormous effort to produce, and there are obviously a million other ways in which the data might be inspired to speak. As Congress complies with the clear demands of transparency, and as coders devise better and more efficient ways to mash-up the data that Congress provides, we will see a future more and more inundated with claims about the links between money and results. Every step will have a plausible tie to troubling influence. Every tie will be reported. We will know everything there is to know about at least the publicly recordable events that might be influencing those who regulate us. The panopticon will have been turned upon the rulers.

What could possibly be wrong with such civic omniscience? How could any democracy live without it? Finally America can really know just who squeezed the sausage and when, and hold accountable anyone with an improper touch. Imagine how much Brandeis, the lover of sunlight, would have loved a server rack crunching terabytes of data. As a political disinfectant, silicon beats sunlight hands down.

Brandeis coined his famous phrase in 1914, in a book called *Other People's Money*, an extraordinary progressive screed directed against that generation's bankers. (He wrote the book when he was still practicing law. It is the sort of book that no Supreme Court nominee today could survive having written.) In the context of the then-frenzied demand for financial reform, Brandeis called for "publicity"—the idea that "bankers when issuing securities … make public the commissions or profits they are receiving."

This publicity was designed to serve two very different purposes. First, Brandeis thought that the numbers would shame bankers into offering terms that were more reasonable—a strategy that has been tried with executive compensation by the SEC, with the result not of shame, but jealousy, leading to even higher pay. Second, and more significantly, Brandeis believed that publicity would make the market function more efficiently. The "law," Brandeis counseled, "should not undertake … to fix bankers' profits. And it should not seek to prevent investors from making bad bargains." But the law should require, he emphatically declared, "full disclosure," to help the buyer judge quality, and thus better judge the "real value of a security." Transparency could thus make a market work better, and should be encouraged as a more efficient way to regulate this potentially dangerous market.

In this simple insight, Brandeis described what has become a school of regulatory theory—what Archon Fung, Mary Graham, and David Weil describe in *Full*

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Disclosure: The Perils and Promise of Transparency as "targeted transparency." As they define it, targeted transparency "represents a distinctive category of public policies that, at their most basic level, mandate disclosure … of standardized, comparable, and disaggregated information regarding specific products or practices to a broad audience in order to achieve a public policy purpose."

Its "ingeniousness," as Brandeis had promised, "lies in its mobilization of individual choice, market forces and participatory democracy through relatively light-handed government action." Moreover, this "ingeniousness" has now been copied, and ever more frequently. Fung and his colleagues have catalogued fifteen targeted transparency programs in their study, ten of them created since 1986, all with substantial bipartisan support, and all with a common mechanism: give the consumer data he or she can use, and he or she will use it to "regulate" the market better.

This mobilization works when the system gives consumers information that they can use, and in a way that they can use it. Think about the requirement that car manufacturers publish average mile-per-gallon statistics for all new cars. We all can compare 36 mpg to 21 mpg. We all understand what that comparison means. That "targeted transparency" rule simplifies the data and presents it in a way that conveys meaningful information. Once simplified and standardized, it makes it possible for consumers to change the way the market works.

The problem, however, is that not all data satisfies the simple requirement that they be information that consumers can use, presented in a way they can use it. "More information," as Fung and his colleagues put it, "does not always produce markets that are more efficient." Instead, "responses to information are inseparable from their interests, desires, resources, cognitive capacities, and social contexts. Owing to these and other factors, people may ignore information, or misunderstand it, or misuse it. Whether and how new information is used to further public objectives depends upon its incorporation into complex chains of comprehension, action, and response."

To know whether a particular transparency rule works, then, we need to trace just how the information will enter these "complex chains of comprehension." We need to see what comparisons the data will enable, and whether those comparisons reveal something real. And it is this that the naked transparency movement has not done. For there are overwhelming reasons why the data about influence that this movement would produce will not enable comparisons that are meaningful. This is not to say the data will not have an effect. It will. But the effect, I fear, is not one that anybody in the "naked transparency movement," or any other thoughtful citizen, would want.

II.

What does the fact of a contribution to a member of Congress mean? Does a contribution cause a member to take a position? Does a member's position cause the contribution? Does the prospect of a contribution make a member more sensitive to a position? Does it secure access? Does it assure a better hearing? Do members compete for positions based upon the contributions they might expect? Do they covet committee assignments based upon the contributions that the committee will inspire? Does Congress regulate with an eye to whether its regulation might induce more contributions?

There is little doubt that the answer to each of these questions is, in some sense and at some time—remember those qualifiers!—yes. In a series titled *Speaking Freely*, published by the Center for Responsive Politics, you can find testimony from many former members from both parties to support each of

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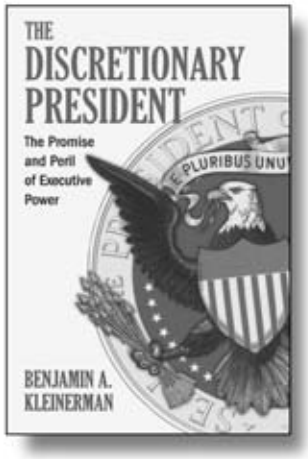

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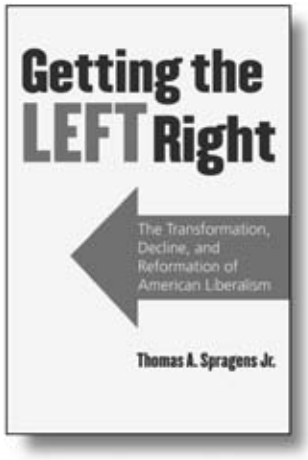

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those assertions. Everyone inside the system knows that claims about influence are, to some degree, true. It is the nature of the system, as we all know.

But there is also little doubt that it is impossible to know whether any particular contribution or contributions brought about a particular vote, or was inspired by a particular vote. Put differently, if there are benign as well as malign contributions, it is impossible to know for any particular contribution which of the two it is. Even if we had all the data in the world and a month of Google coders, we could not begin to sort corrupting contributions from innocent contributions.

Or at least "corrupting" in a certain sense. All the data in the world will not tell us whether a particular contribution bent a result by securing a vote or an act that otherwise would not have occurred. The most we could say—though this is still a very significant thing to say—is that the contributions are corrupting the reputation of Congress, because they raise the question of whether the member acted to track good sense or campaign dollars. Where a member of Congress acts in a way inconsistent with his principles or his constituents, but consistent with a significant contribution, that act at least raises a question about the integrity of the decision. But beyond a question, the data says little else.

But then, so what? If the data does not tell us anything, what is the harm in producing it? Even if it does not prove, it suggests. And if it suggests something false, then let the offended legislator rebut it. The public will weigh the truth against the charge. Enter another Brandeisean cliché: "If there be time to expose through discussion the falsehood and fallacies ... the remedy to be applied is more speech, not enforced silence." This sounds right.

But would such a remedy work? Would more speech really help to uncover the falsehoods? In answering this question, it helps to think concretely. How, actually, does this sort of dialogue proceed? Consider an example. In the waning days of the Clinton administration, friends of the credit-card industry were trying to get what would become the Bankruptcy Abuse Prevention and Consumer Protection Act of 2005 enacted into law. President Clinton was originally in favor of the bill. But in 2000, first lady Hillary Clinton read an op-ed piece in *The New York Times* detailing the harm that the bill would do to lower-middle-class Americans. She began referring to "that awful bill"—lower case "b"—and took on the mission of stopping her husband from making it law. He apparently acquiesced, letting the bill die in a pocket veto.

Two years later, First Lady Clinton was Senator Clinton. And two years later, she had received over $140,000 in campaign contributions from credit-card and financial-services companies. Two years later, the bill came up for a vote. But by now Senator Clinton apparently saw things differently from how First Lady Clinton had seen them. In 2001, she voted for "that awful bill" twice. (In 2005, she switched her position again, opposing its final passage.)

Objectively speaking, there are any number of reasons why Senator Clinton would view the financial-services sector differently from how First Lady Clinton would view it. She was, after all, a senator from New York. New York has a special relationship to financial-services companies. (Put aside for a moment that it also has a special relationship to lower-middle-class credit-card holders.) There are many reasons why these differences would have an effect on her support for an "awful bill." But whatever objectivity might teach, we all know something undeniable about this fact of $140,000 being attached to any sentence about switching support in a political context. Everyone learning the fact now "knows" just why she switched, don't they? Whether true or not, money is the reason for the switch in this case. Even supporters of Senator Clinton found it hard to see things differently.

The point is salience, and the assumptions of our political culture. At this time the judgment that Washington is all about money is so wide and so deep that among all the possible reasons to explain something puzzling, money is the first, and most likely the last, explanation that will be given. It sets the default against which anything different must fight. And this default, this unexamined assumption of causality, will only be reinforced by the naked transparency movement and its correlations. What we believe will be confirmed, again and again.

But will not this supposed salience of money—the faithful disciple of Brandeis asks—simply inspire more debate about whether in fact money buys results in Congress? Won't more people enter to negate the default? Like a rash of flat-earth defenders, won't the attention cause round-earth truth to spread? Again, we must keep our intuitions guided by the concrete. No doubt false claims will sometimes inspire more truth. But what about when the claims are neither true nor false? Or worse, when the claims actually require more than the 140 characters in a tweet?

This is the problem of attention-span. To understand something—an essay, an argument, a proof of innocence—requires a certain amount of attention. But on many issues, the average, or even rational, amount of attention given to understand many of these correlations, and their defamatory implications, is almost always less than the amount of time required. The result is a systemic misunderstanding—at least if the story is reported in a context, or in a manner, that does not neutralize such misunderstanding. The listing and correlating of data hardly qualifies as such a context. Understanding how and why some stories will be understood, or not understood, provides the key to grasping what is wrong with the tyranny of transparency.

Once we have named it, you will begin to see the attention-span problem everywhere, in public and private life. Think of politics, increasingly the art of exploiting attention-span problems—tagging your opponent with barbs that no one has time to understand, let alone analyze. Think of any complex public policy issue, from the economy to debates about levels of foreign aid.

Even the increased demand for "privacy" in acts that one commits in public—activities on the Internet, for example—might best be explained by the attention span problem. Consider, for example, a story by Peter Lewis in *The New York Times* in 1998:

> Surveillance cameras followed the attractive young blond woman through the lobby of the midtown Manhattan hotel, kept a glassy eye on her as she rode the elevator up to the 23rd floor and peered discreetly down the hall as she knocked at the door to my room. I have not seen the videotapes, but I can imagine the digital readout superimposed on the scenes, noting the exact time of the encounter. That would come in handy if someone were to question later why this woman, who is not my wife, was visiting my hotel room during a recent business trip. The cameras later saw us heading off to dinner and to the theater—a middle-aged, married man from Texas with his arm around a pretty East Village woman young enough to be his daughter.... As a matter of fact, she is my daughter.

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"Privacy" here would hardly be invoked for the purpose of hiding embarrassing facts. Quite the contrary: the hidden facts here are the most innocent or loving. Yet it would hide these facts because we may be certain that few would take the time to understand them enough to see them as innocent.

The point in such cases is not that the public isn't smart enough to figure out what the truth is. The point is the opposite. The public is too smart to waste its time focusing on matters that are not important for it to understand. The ignorance here is rational, not pathological. It is what we would hope everyone would do, if everyone were rational about how best to deploy their time. Yet even if rational, this ignorance produces predictable and huge misunderstandings. A mature response to these inevitable misunderstandings are policies that strive not to exacerbate them.

III.

So are there ways to respond? Can we get the good of transparency without the bad? The *Journal of the American Medical Association* thought that it had found a way to do so. JAMA has long had policies designed to ferret out conflicts of interest between JAMA-published authors and the medical industry. Like most journals in medicine, JAMA required disclosure, and was among the most aggressive in the extent and the reach of the disclosures required.

But as attention to disclosure grew in the medical field, the failure to disclose adequately has become a serious charge. Omission is now a serious commission. Indeed, the mere charge of failing to disclose is enough to stain a reputation. As with a charge of sexual harassment, the establishment of innocence does not really erase its harm.

In response to this sensitivity, JAMA instituted a policy that was designed to avoid the costs of wrongful charges of conflicts of interest. As described in *The Wall Street Journal*, JAMA required that anyone filing a complaint with JAMA that a conflict had not been disclosed must remain silent about the charge until it was investigated. The motivations behind this "gag order" (as it was referred to by those who opposed it) are not hard to see. While JAMA has a strong institutional interest in avoiding publications that hide conflicts, it also has an interest in avoiding charges that will do harm whether or not they are proven to be true. Recognizing both the salience problem and the attention-span problem, JAMA sought a way to avoid the bad in a regime of disclosure (misunderstanding) while preserving the good (verifiable conflicts).

The rule was inspired earlier this year by Professor Jonathan Leo of Lincoln Memorial University. At the beginning of the year, he filed a complaint with JAMA about the failure of one researcher to disclose a conflict. JAMA sat on the complaint for five months. In frustration, Leo published his charge in the *British Medical Journal*. As reported by the *The Wall Street Journal*, JAMA responded angrily, demanding that he stop his campaign until JAMA's investigation was complete, and formally requiring anyone making a similar charge to remain silent until JAMA has responded.

But once the story of JAMA's effort to silence a critic had been made public, that "gag rule" was of course doomed. After an internal review, the journal reversed its policy. Any effort to protect the accused against unjustified criticism was abandoned. Unfair complaints would have to be tolerated—as they would have to be in any similar context. The age of transparency is upon us. The need to protect the whistleblower is unquestionable—driving off even modest efforts to cushion the blows from a mistaken accusation.

These troubles with transparency point to a pattern that should be familiar to anyone watching the range of horribles—or blessings, depending upon your perspective—that the Internet is visiting upon us. So, too, does the response. The pattern is familiar. The network disables a certain kind of control. The response of those who benefitted from that control is a frantic effort to restore it. Depending upon your perspective, restoration seems justified or not. But regardless of your perspective, restoration fails. Despite the best efforts of the most powerful, the control—so long as there is "an Internet"—is lost.

Consider, for example, the dynamic that is now killing newspapers, or more precisely, the business model for newspapers, caused either by the explosion of more efficient technologies for doing what newspapers used to profit from, or by the inevitable explosion of competition driving papers to make free what they used to charge for. Until quite recently, newspapers were among the most profitable local businesses. As one commentator calculated, average operating revenues even as late as 2000–2007 were 27.3 percent. But a raft of technologies that were seeded about a decade ago are now pushing newspapers over the brink. In 1995, a San Francisco geek named Craig opened a community website where people could list items to sell, for free. With much better coverage, space, and (obviously) price, Craigslist quickly began to dominate newsprint in markets where both went head to head. There was little that the physical paper could do to respond. A formerly lucrative cross-subsidy was gone.

A complementary story could be told without blaming Craig. People buy newspapers for the stories, not for the ink. As innovators on the Internet began offering free access to those stories, the demand for ink-staining versions declined. Why should I buy *The New York Times* when its content is available for free on its site? And if the content of *The New York Times* is not free on the site, no problem: I can get (essentially) the same stories elsewhere. Or worse, for local papers: if I can get access to a range of papers at a click (see Google News), why would I buy any one in particular? A business that had relatively little competition because of the costs of local markets now has almost endless competition, driving the price for this freely distributed good (as economists would predict) to zero.

Both dynamics—together they are the consequence of what we might call the "free content movement"—have had a predictable effect. First on the chopping block is investigative journalism, with its risky return, and even when successful, a return not measured in cash. Less than 10 percent of large daily newspapers in America have four investigative journalists or more. More than 40 percent have no investigative journalists at all. One need not hate the Internet to be deeply worried about the repercussions of this development for democracy.

Or think about recorded music. Until the late 1990s, the record industry had a happy fate. Every couple of years a new format would best an earlier leader—eight-track beating the LP; cassettes beating the eight-track; CDs beating cassettes. Consumers would then eagerly migrate to the new thing. With that migration, new content would have to be bought. Old content had to be replicated. Music was like old library books that you would have to check out again and again and again—except that this lending was not for free.

ANTHONY RUSSO

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Along comes digital technology, and this model of profit was significantly threatened. The nature of digital is perfect copies, freely made. The nature of certain popular technologies—Napster, and then peer-to-peer (p2p) more generally—was to encourage literally millions of people to make literally billions of perfect copies and then share them for free. Such behavior could not help but dampen the demand for some recorded music (even if it spurred the demand for other recorded music—namely, music that wouldn't have been discovered if the price of admission had been a $20 CD). And it couldn't help but inspire a richly different "free culture movement." An industry that had become addicted to the blockbuster album was obviously allergic to a technology that threatened this promise of reliable profits.

Both of these developments have inspired Luddite-like responses. There is a regular call to close free access to news on the Web. There are principled objections to Craigslist, even if they are faint and confused. And there are politically well-supported objections to peer-to-peer file-sharing, seeking both laws and technology to kill the p2p "market." In all these cases, the response to the problem is to attack the source of the problem: the freedom secured by the network. In all these cases, the response presumes that we can return to a world where the network did not disable control.

But the network is not going away. We are not going to kill the "darknet" (as Microsoft called it in a fantastic paper about the inevitable survival of peer-to-peer technologies). We are not going to regulate access to news, or ads for free futons. We are not going back to the twentieth century. In a decade, a majority of Americans will not even remember what that century was like.

But then what? If we can't go back, how do we go forward? For each of these problems, there have been solutions proposed that do not depend foolishly upon breaking the network. These solutions may not produce a world as good as the world was before (at least for some). They may not benefit everyone in the same way. But they are solutions that remove an important part of the problem in each case, and restore at least part of the good that is recognized in the past.

With p2p file-sharing, scholars such as William Fisher and Neil Netanel have proposed models of compensation that would achieve the objectives of copyright without trying to control the distribution of content. Filesharing would be legal, at least in some contexts. But then artists would be compensated for the harm caused by this file-sharing through systems that track the popularity of downloads. Britney Spears would get more money than Lyle Lovett (the mysteries of taste!), with revenue coming either from a tax or from fees paid by key nodes in the network. The Electronic Frontier Foundation has a related proposal for a "voluntary collective license": pay a certain flat amount, and you secure an immunity from prosecution for non-commercial file-sharing. The Green Party in Germany has taken this idea one step further, and proposed a "cultural flat rate" that would apply to culture on the network generally, securing compensation for the artists and immunity from prosecution for the kids. All these changes would render legal the behavior your kids are engaging in right now (trust me), and assure some sort of livelihood for artists.

With journalism, the answers are less clear. There is growing legislative support for allowing newspapers to become (intentional) nonprofits, thus enabling tax-deductible donations to support their mission, and allowing the mission to be more securely set, free of the demands of stockholders or commercial return. Likewise, there has been growing support for nonprofits such as ProPublica, which fund investigative journalism that is then released freely to partner newspapers. As with music, the aim in both cases is to find a different way to fund the creation of what economists call "public goods." And as economists will tell you, no way is perfect. Each has its benefits and its flaws. But both alternatives have the singular virtue of accepting the architecture of the Internet as it is, and working out how best to provide the goods we need given this architecture.

So is there an analogous solution to the problems created by transparency? Is there an answer that accepts that transparency is here to stay—indeed, that it will become ever more lasting and ever more clear—but that avoids the harms that transparency creates?

In the context of public health, where doctors are forced to reveal any connection with industry, I cannot begin to imagine what that solution would look like. The citizenry is not remotely will-

Recriminations of a Former Left-Hand Man

I knew it had to come, but according
to my plans, and to the arrangement
of "usual arrangements," I'd be dead
by that time. And I am: dead to the world
in which I was so recognizably alive.

Of course I never guessed *how* it would come.
(Guessing wasn't in the cards we held close
to the chest.) Other people—everyone
else—were the ones who had to guess. "Keep them
guessing," Roy would say. He liked saying that.

And other people did guess. They guessed how
it would come, but luckily I *am* dead,
as far as anyone can testify.
(*Now there's a word.*) This morning when Rachel,
who thinks she wants to be an actress, read

the drivel in the *Times* about that play,
I knew I *was* dead: not even names
(Roy always said, after too many shots
of us two drunk, "no names, please")
—but a Pulitzer! what the fuck is that!

And when she asked, as any midwestern
thirteen-year-old might innocently ask,
"Daddy, who was Roy Cohn?" it was childsplay
to explain. Did I know anything more
than any daddy in Columbus, O?

Did I need to know anything at all?
By now there had been so many others
between what I was and what he needed
that no one even remembers I was
first. Roy's first, not mine. Let me take a guess:

that made it easier for all of us—
and none of that stuff ever since. *Ever?*
Ask Rachel's mom if she had any cause
to be dissatisfied. Forty years on,
who the hell else *could* you ask?

And as for David Schine's satisfactions,
no one ever asks. I'd say, being dead,
they're overrated—as they were for Roy,
they are for me, and will be for Rachel,
just wait around and see. Love you, daddy.

RICHARD HOWARD

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ing to fund publicly the research necessary to support drug development today. Close to 70 percent of the money for clinical drug trials in the United States comes from private industry. Private funding here seems inevitable—and with it, the potential for perceived conflicts. That potential will inevitably require more and more transparency about who got what from whom.

In the context of public officials, however, the solutions are obvious, and old, and eminently tractable. If the problem with transparency is what might be called its structural insinuations—its constant suggestions of a sin that is present sometimes but not always—then the obvious solution is to eliminate those insinuations and those suggestions. A system of publicly funded elections would make it impossible to suggest that the reason some member of Congress voted the way he voted was because of money. Perhaps it was because he was stupid. Perhaps it was because he was liberal, or conservative. Perhaps it was because he failed to pay attention to the issues at stake. Whatever the reason, each of these reasons is democracy-enhancing. They give the democrat a reason to get involved, if only to throw the bum out. And by removing what is understood to be an irrelevant factor—money—the desire to get involved is not stanched by the cynicism that stifles so much in the current system.

The current version of this very old idea—Theodore Roosevelt gave us its first prominent play in 1907—is called the Fair Elections Now Act. Sponsored in the Senate by Dick Durbin and Arlen Specter, and in the House by John Larson and Walter Jones, the bill would grant to qualifying candidates a certain grubstake to fund their campaigns. In addition to that initial stake, candidates could raise as much money as they want, with contributions capped at $100 per citizen per cycle. Thus Roosevelt meets Obama, with a proposal that marries the ideal of neutralizing any appearance of improper influence with the energy that small contributions add to any campaign.

The only significant flaw in this bill, at least in my view, is its title. Waving the "fairness flag" in front of the Supreme Court is the proverbial red flag in front of the bull. What possible reason is there, the Court will ask, for allowing Congress to regulate "fairness"—at least where "fairness" seems so clearly to benefit one side in most political debates? And the concern is a good one. There is too much incumbency protection built into our politics already. It would be much worse if the state were putting a thumb on one side of a political scale.

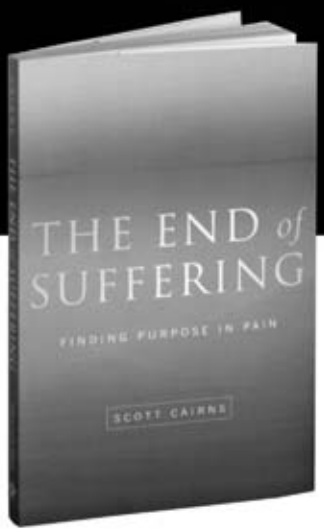
But the objective of these proposals is not, or should not be, fairness. The objective should be trustworthiness. The problem that these bills address is that we have a Congress that nobody trusts—a Congress that, in the opinion of the vast majority of the American people, sells its results to the highest bidder. The aim of these proposals should be to change that perception by establishing a system in which no one could believe that money was buying results. In this way we can eliminate the possibility of influence that nourishes the cynicism that is anyway inevitable when technology makes it so simple to imply an endless list of influence.

As with ProPublica or nonprofit newspapers, or a "cultural flat-rate," or a compulsory license to compensate for file-sharing, proposals for public funding can thus be understood as a response to an unavoidable pathology of the technology—its pathological transparency—that increasingly rules our lives and our institutions. Without this response—with the ideal of naked transparency alone—our democracy, like the music industry and print journalism generally, is doomed. The Web will show us every possible influence. The most cynical will be the most salient. Limited attention span will assure that the most salient is the most stable. Unwarranted conclusions will be drawn, careers will be destroyed, alienation will grow. No doubt we will rally to the periodic romantic promising change (such as Barack Obama), but nothing will change. D.C. will become as D.C. is becoming: a place filled with souls animated by—as Robert Kaiser put it recently in his fine book *So Damn Much Money*—a "familiar American yearning: to get rich."

But if the transparency movement could be tied to this movement for reform—if every step for more transparency were attended by a reform that would disabuse us of the illusion that this technology is just a big simple blessing, and set out to make transparency both good and harmless—then its consequence could be salutary and constructive. When transparency and democracy are considered in this way, we may even permit ourselves to imagine a way out of this cycle of cynicism.

Reformers rarely feel responsible for the bad that their fantastic new reform effects. Their focus is

"A NEW & LIBERATING PERSPECTIVE"*



There hasn't been a book this honest about human suffering since Wieseltier's *Kaddish*. Scott Cairns' thoughtful essay on what he calls "the puzzlement of our afflictions" probes ancient wisdom for fresh meaning seeking a radical new vision of the full breadth and purpose of pain.

"This magnificent book omits the trite comforts often found in this subgenre and offers instead a rich tapestry of varied tone and content that will illuminate for readers their own experience with suffering."
—*Publishers Weekly, *starred review*

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always on the good. The bad is someone else's problem. It may well be asking too much to imagine more than this. But as we see the consequences of changes that many of us view as good, we might wonder whether more good might have been done had more responsibility been in the mix. The music industry was never going to like the Internet, but its war against the technology might well have been less hysterical and self-defeating if better and more balanced alternatives had been pressed from the beginning. No one can dislike Craigslist (or Craig), but we all would have benefited from a clearer recognition of what was about to be lost. Internet triumphalism is not a public good.

Likewise with transparency. There is no questioning the good that transparency creates in a wide range of contexts, government especially. But we should also recognize that the collateral consequence of that good need not itself be good. And if that collateral bad is busy certifying to the American public what it thinks it already knows, we should think carefully about how to avoid it. Sunlight may well be a great disinfectant. But as anyone who has ever waded through a swamp knows, it has other effects as well. ◆

Robert Alter
SCRIPTURE PICTURE

THE BOOK OF GENESIS
Illustrated by R. Crumb
(W. W. Norton, 224 pp., $24.95)

A certain amount of sensationalistic misinformation was circulated in the press last spring, here and in England, when word got out that R. Crumb had done an illustrated version of Genesis. Crumb was the leading innovative figure of the underground comics movement of the late 1960s and has enjoyed a devoted following ever since. His graphic work, always memorable, is often physically aggressive, raunchy, and sexually explicit. Against that background of countercultural tawdriness, the press reports suggested that Crumb's Genesis meant to make a mockery of the biblical text, and that some of it verged on pornography. Even though the jacket of the finished book bears a warning in bold lettering—"ADULT SUPERVISION RECOMMENDED FOR MINORS" (the same may be said, in fact, about Genesis itself)—these scandalous imputations are entirely groundless.

The jacket of Crumb's Genesis also announces, with the Crumbian emphasis of two exclamation points: "The first book of the Bible graphically depicted! Nothing left out!" It is unclear whether "the first book of the Bible" means Genesis or is a claim that this is the first time a book of the Bible has been graphically depicted in its entirety. If the latter is the case, it is, as far as I know, an accurate claim; and it is certainly worth pondering what is gained or lost by representing biblical narrative in graphic frames verse by verse, with images for virtually everything, including the begats.

I should add immediately that I have an indirect entanglement in this book. When Crumb began the project, he sent me the first few chapters that he had done, requesting permission to use my translation of the biblical text, with the stipulation that he would be free to diverge from it when the spirit moved him. Terms were agreed on in an amicable professional manner. The translation that appears in the completed book is for the most part mine, as Crumb duly notes at the beginning of his brief introduction. From time to time, though, he introduces a word or phrase from the King James Version or from another translation, and he also sometimes tinkers—always a little disconcerting to a translator—with my version. I should add that I have absolutely no financial interest in the sales of this book, and so whatever I have to say about it reflects nothing but my considered response to its images.

When some chapters of the book were published in *The New Yorker* in June, a few people with whom I have spoken about them expressed disappointment. Just the same old R. Crumb, they objected: he has not succeeded in developing a visual style that is adequate to the power of the biblical text. Such criticism does not seem to me justified. Crumb has always been an artist with a single style, a distinctive and emphatic one—in this regard as in others he is certainly no Picasso; and so it should neither surprise nor disappoint us that he has used his style to interpret the Bible. His women have always been broad-shouldered, big-breasted, thick-lipped, erotically energetic figures with the physiques of NFL linebackers, and that is how his biblical women, from Eve to Rebekah to Rachel, appear. The Crumb brand is certainly here; but in this signature visual idiom he has produced a frequently arresting interpretation of Genesis.

I stress that it is an interpretation, because the extremely concise biblical narrative, abounding in hints and gaps and ellipses, famously demands interpretation. (Gershom Scholem once observed that the imperative for interpretation is the hallmark of all canonical texts.) The process of interpreting Genesis began in the Bible itself—in passages from the Former Prophets that elaborately allude to it, in the Prophets, and in late biblical texts such as Esther and Daniel, which are, among other things, interpretive re-castings of the Joseph story. The Midrash, produced in late antiquity, is often an interpretive fleshing-out of the spare biblical narratives, an attempt to fill in the narrative gaps and read closely and imaginatively between the lines. And this is essentially what Crumb does graphically, with a special emphasis on the element of flesh.

His graphic representation sometimes brings alive the reality of the narrated event. Chapter 14, which is almost certainly from a literary source distinct from the three principal ones out of which the book is shaped, features Abraham (still known as Abram) in the anomalous role of warrior-prince. This martial Abraham is so different from the figure who appears elsewhere in the text that I suspect most readers glide through this military episode, this strange war against an alliance of invading eastern kings, without fully registering it. But Crumb's depiction of Abraham, riding a camel and spearing a fleeing enemy soldier through the back, compels us to take in the violent action of the story. Similarly, Crumb's image of Joseph flung into the pit by his brothers, lying face down on its rocky bottom, hands clutching the ground, tears rolling from his eyes, makes one recognize the terror and the desperation of the seventeen-year-old, where the spare narrative, silent at this point on Joseph's reaction, merely says, "And they took him and flung him into the pit. And the pit was empty, there was no water in it." (Crumb is strongest in representing fear, consternation, dismay, rage, lust, and abjection,

Robert Alter's new book, Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible, will be published by Princeton University Press in February.

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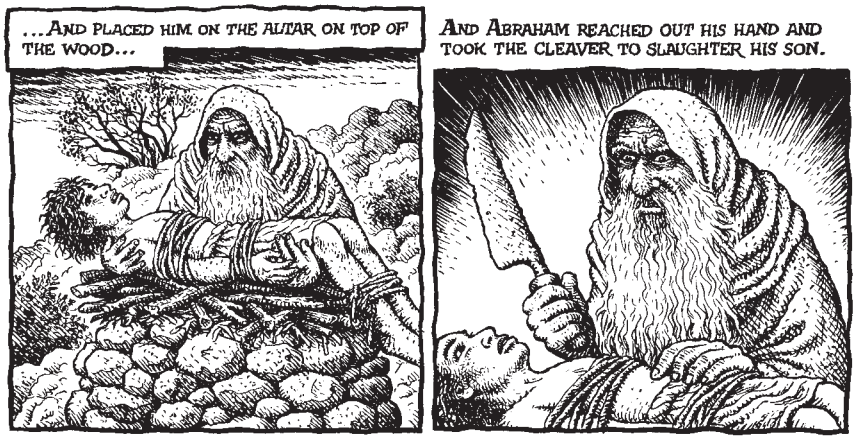
all of which are abundantly present in these stories, and he is less interesting in the portrayal of more nuanced emotional states.) Onan's practice of coitus interruptus with Tamar—the term "onanism" is based on a misreading of this story—becomes perfectly clear in Crumb's image of the two naked figures seen from the back (genitalia are never shown in the sex scenes), Onan obviously having withdrawn from Tamar and exhibiting what one must call an orgasmic facial expression.

When Joseph, in Egyptian royal garb, addresses his brothers, his speech bubble—remember, this a comic book—is filled with hieroglyphics, and the shave-polled figure at his side, holding a tablet and stylus, conveys Joseph's reported dialogue in the English—which is to say, Hebrew—words inscribed in his own speech bubble. This interpreter, *meilits*, is mentioned in Genesis 42:23 only after



The binding of Isaac, from *The Book of Genesis* by R. Crumb

the second dialogue between Joseph and his brothers, as Joseph is about to go off to weep. So the small surprise of a bit of delayed narrative information is surrendered here because of a necessity of the visual medium—but the interpreter's presence in the graphically represented scene is quite vivid, and amusing. And the final reunion of Jacob with Joseph in Egypt is affectingly visualized: both figures kneeling on the ground, the brothers standing and watching, Joseph seen from behind, old Jacob clasping him with both arms, his uplifted face weeping but in rapture. It is an image that impressively meets the challenge of the high drama.

Perhaps the most winning aspect of Crumb's Genesis is its inventive playfulness. He is keenly aware that many bizarre things happen in these stories, first in the primeval history because of its legendary character and then in the patriarchal narrative because of the writers' deep interest in what is odd, paradoxical, and surprising in human behavior and in divine intervention. It is fun to follow Crumb's images. In some instances, the fun is a direct visual translation of what is conveyed in the narrative report. More often, it derives from Crumb's play with the biblical text. Here are a few examples of the former category. In Chapter 23, where Abraham negotiates with Ephron the Hittite over the purchase of a burial site, Ephron at first pretends to magnanimity but then shows himself to be a rapacious bargainer in naming an extortionate price; and in the graphic representation, we see a sharp-featured Ephron watching warily and greedily as Abraham weighs out the four hundred shekels of silver in the pan of a scale. God's resting on the seventh day of creation is shown by his sitting with his eyes closed, fatigued, his back against one of the trees of the Garden, while naked Adam and Eve in the background cuddle together in sleep. The figure of God, with flowing white hair and beard, clearly owes a good deal to Blake, and the dismayed facial expressions of Adam and Eve as they are banished from the Garden are strongly reminiscent of Masaccio's famous painting of this scene. (Though Blake may here provide Crumb a solution of sorts, it must be said that the notion of God as an old man with a white beard is a hackneyed and highly reductive representation of the deity of Genesis, who is often presented anthropomorphically but is not restricted to a definite image.) The destruction of Sodom—especially the third of Crumb's four panels, which shows faceless and mummy-like writhing figures, backs enveloped in flame as more fire and brimstone rain down from above—is a tour de force, combining biblical apocalypse with a comic-book science-fiction vision of worlds destroyed. The bizarreness of Pharaoh's two dreams, prophetic of the years of plenty and of famine, is brilliantly caught by Crumb in his depiction, for the first of the dreams, of the seven "meager-fleshed" cows as savage-looking creatures cannibalistically chomping down on the flanks of the seven fat cows.

By and large, Crumb's flights of fancy in visually elaborating the spare narrative are beguiling, and they seem to me to be a legitimate treatment of the text. Adam and Eve petting the sweet animals of the Garden is a neat little touch. The gateway to Sodom is framed by two monumental pillars on each of which is carved a winged bull—possibly, a cherub—with a horn-helmeted naked goddess (Anat?) standing on its back and a menacing gargoyle high above it. The facial expressions of Abraham and Hagar as they consummate their union are a fine interpretive invention: Abraham on top, palpably an old man, is squinting or staring straight ahead, perhaps into the future where he hopes his progeny will emerge, while the young and sensual Hagar, recumbent, her lips parted, is either giving herself to the pleasure of the moment or perhaps merely submitting to it. In a very different sex scene, when Lot's two daughters, imagining after the devastation of Sodom that there is no man left for them on earth, get their father drunk so that he can be led to impregnate them, Crumb provides contrasting variations on the sexual act: the elder daughter is shown in the missionary position, evidently enjoying herself, while in another frame the younger daughter bestrides her besotted father, who is still clutching a wineskin, her face turned to one side in an enigmatic expression that might reflect dismay, or an inner distancing from the act, or a kind of solipsistic concentration on it.

A fine comic sense of the confounding of tongues in the Babel story is conveyed by the speech bubbles over the distraught faces of the builders of the tower: in one there are Hebrew characters; in a second, cuneiform; in a third, hieroglyphics; and in two others, forms of writing that I suspect the artist has invented. A different comic vein is visible in the representation of Rebekah complaining to Isaac about Esau's Hittite wives: she looks altogether like a rasping Jewish mother objecting to the shiksas with whom her son has taken up. Among other engaging visual elaborations one might note Laban, waving a juicy chunk of meat as he bargains with Jacob; Leah's little sons squabbling with

COURTESY W. W. NORTON

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one another as she holds Dinah, whose birth has just been reported in the narrative; and Jacob exerting terrific effort to roll the stone from the mouth of the well and to push different stones into place as commemorative markers; and Potiphar, having "left all that he had in Joseph's hands," lying on a couch, feasting, while he takes in a performance of Egypt's finest topless dancers. In a particularly delightful bit of whimsy, Manasseh, Joseph's firstborn son, is shown as a naked cavorting toddler, with a little toy Egyptian chariot at his feet.

There has always been an element of wild grotesqueness in the art of R. Crumb, and there are moments in his illustrated Genesis when one is not entirely sure whether this wildness has the effect of drolly playing with the text or of running at cross-purposes with it. For the verse "Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife and they become one flesh," Crumb shows a naked Adam and Eve frolicking together in the grass, but with bared teeth and popping eyes that would seem to express something closer to craziness than to erotic rapture. This is, of course, one of Crumb's trademark looks, and its appearance here may reflect the limitations of his emotional means. When Abraham entering Egypt says, "I know that my wife is beautiful to behold," the image of the heavy-set and coarse-featured Sarah may make us think twice about the accuracy of this judgment, though of course beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and I would guess that the graphic image might actually correspond to the artist's feminine ideal.

The fifty chapters of Genesis exhibit a broad spectrum of narrative situations, and the visual art is not equally interesting in all of them. Jacob's enduring passion for Rachel—"Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed in his eyes but a few days because of his love for her"—is one of the great love stories of ancient literature, but Jacob's facial expressions here, and the images of Jacob and Rachel together, do not seem adequate to the emotional depths of the story. One of the most remarkable moments in Genesis occurs near the end, when the 130-year-old Jacob, asked about his age by Pharaoh, lugubriously intones, "Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained the days of my fathers in their days of sojourning." There is resonant complexity in this piece of dialogue. The ancient Jacob extravagantly overstates the paucity of his days, though conceivably he might have in mind his grandfather, who reportedly lived to the age of 175. He would seem equally to overstate the "evil" of his days, but his words also make us recognize that he is a man who has achieved all he wanted—birthright, blessing, sons, material abundance, marriage to his great love—at the terrible cost of losing Rachel and seeming to lose Joseph, and reduced from a position of power to being the helpless victim and dupe of his fierce sons. Such a tragic figure, with his haunting paradoxes, requires Rembrandt or Tintoretto. Crumb's picture of a bearded Jacob with troubled or brooding eyes does not do the trick.

Mystery is another experience that is not especially amenable to Crumb's style. In the breathtakingly terse and disturbing story of the Binding of Isaac, the agonizing contradictions of the narrative are conveyed here chiefly through Abraham's eyes, which are repeatedly averted from Isaac and stare straight ahead, bleakly or despairingly. This is an earnest attempt to render the emotional tension of this difficult story; but the power of the text seems diminished, not enhanced or illuminated, by these images. In the representation of the covenant enacted over the cloven animal parts in Genesis 15, Crumb tries to get something of the looming twilight mystery of the episode by drawing Abraham in the foreground, with a kind of shimmering bearded Blakean God addressing him from the background; but I think the unadorned words of the text are more effective than the images in evoking this portentous moment. Jacob's wrestling through the night with the anonymous stranger who will give him a new name is one of the most hauntingly obscure episodes in Genesis, but Crumb's comics reduces it to two bearded guys in need of a haircut grappling with each other. This is one of those moments when one feels like dispensing with his images altogether.

Such moments expose the limits of the artist's range, but the book as a whole offers many pleasures in the vigor and the wit of its visual imagination, and there are even some exegetical insights in the way the reticences of the spare narrative are fleshed out visually. Of the first of Tamar's doomed husbands, all we are told is, "And Er, Judah's firstborn, was evil in the eyes of the Lord." Under these words, Crumb offers an image of a sinister-looking figure thrusting a dagger into an old man's belly as he seizes his victim's money bag. The next set of words in the biblical text is "And the Lord put him to death," which is matched with a frame in which we see Er lying on his back in a pool of blood with his throat slit while his killer stealthily leaves the scene, a dagger in his right hand and the money bag in his left. (This may be reminiscent of Mack the Knife in *The Threepenny Opera*.) In this naturalist reading, divine retribution is unleashed through human agency.

Most interestingly, when Dinah is led out by her brothers from the house of Shechem, the man who raped her, after they have massacred all the males of the town, Crumb shows her weeping, her feet dragging reluctantly as one of her brothers pulls her by the hand. This is by no means an inevitable reading of the story, but it is certainly a stimulating one. Shechem, after all, falls in love with Dinah after the rape; and only now, at the very end of the story, do we learn that ever since the rape she has been in Shechem's house—perhaps, as some interpreters imagine, in captivity, but perhaps, as Crumb suggests, of her own free will, because her feelings have been touched by the loving devotion of the man whose desire for her first expressed itself in an act of sexual aggression.

This illustrated Genesis raises a larger question about the narrative medium, about the difference between words and images—a question that is not dependent on the nature of R. Crumb's gifts as an artist. Western art is of course rich in paintings that represent specific scenes from the Bible, and many of the stories in Genesis have attracted many painters. The banishment from the Garden, the binding of Isaac, the wooing of Rebekah, Joseph and Potiphar's wife, Jacob blessing Ephraim and Manasseh: these have all been the subject of memorable and even great paintings. But all paintings isolate particular moments in the narrative for pictorial representation. They do not portray the whole tale, but only that part of the tale that has for some reason engaged them. And they do not tell, they show.

Crumb's project is different in kind, because the artist's images, as in a graphic novel, are integral to the narrative, inviting us to see word and image as inseparable partners in the telling of the tale. There are some distinct advantages to this procedure, but there are inescapable disadvantages as well. A visual representation of a character or an event is inevitably a specification. When we see Er as a cutthroat who gets his own throat cut, the meaning of "was evil in the eyes of the Lord" and the mechanism of "the Lord put him to death" are strongly stipulated, and other possible meanings are

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closed off. This foreclosure of ambiguity or of multiple meanings is intrinsic to the graphic narrative medium, and hence is pervasive in the illustrated text.

As a prelude to the Flood story, to illustrate the moment when God sees that "the wickedness of the human creature was great on the earth," Crumb is obliged to provide an image, and he gives us a forceful one, in a panoramic panel that spans the width of the page, of armor-clad warriors (including a female one!) stabbing and stomping on naked victims while two royal figures watch complacently from the left edge of the frame. Well, why not? But this strong depiction necessarily excludes theft, economic exploitation, perversion of the judicial system, acts of sexual degradation, and many other possibilities of man's fecund inhumanity to man that are opened up by the stark generality of "wickedness great on the earth." The image concretizes, and thereby constrains, our imagination.

Let me cite a sexual case, because as a rule Crumb is so keenly imaginative in representing sexual situations. One of the most famously enigmatic moments in Genesis comes when Noah has drunk himself into a stupor in the aftermath of the Flood and "exposed himself within the tent. And Ham the father of Canaan saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside." Exegetes for two thousand years have been trying to make out exactly what transpired between father and son. The most innocent reading, which is the one that Crumb chooses to follow, is that Ham simply saw his father exposed, thus violating what those who adopt this view assume was a grave taboo in Israelite society. This reading may well be right, though the report that when Noah wakes from his wine "he knew what his youngest son had done to him" might suggest that an act more palpable than mere seeing was perpetrated. Some interpreters in late antiquity, encouraged by these words and probably thinking of the Zeus-Chronos myth, imagined that Ham castrated his father, though this notion has always seemed to me rather unlikely.

One cannot dismiss the linguistic fact that to see someone's nakedness is a recurrent biblical idiom for incest. In the pointedly parallel story of Lot's daughters, which also occurs after a sweeping cataclysm—the first time the flood, the fire next time, in the words of the Negro spiritual—there is another drunken father, and he is explicitly the object of a consummated incestuous impulse on the part of his offspring. None of this, of course, is conclusive evidence of what Ham actually did to his father; but the deep interest of the story derives precisely from the nimbus of ambiguity that is generated by its extremely laconic formulation. Perhaps the writer or editor felt that this mythic material was too hot to handle except through the most reticent ellipsis. (A similar dynamic seems to be at work in the cryptic story of the sons of God coupling with the daughters of man.) My own preference as a reader is to relish the shimmer of murky possibilities, including the more lurid ones, even if I am left without a concrete or confident picture of what actually happened. Pictorial representation forces you to decide one way—which, however appealing or plausible that way may be, imposes a limit on the story told in words.

This disparity between how words and pictures work as narrative vehicles is by no means limited to the Bible. Imagine for a moment an illustrated version of *Anna Karenina* or *The Charterhouse of Parma*, in which there would be one or more graphic frame for every sentence of the novel. An artist with Crumb's inventive energy might provide many pleasures along the way, but what is enabled in the novel through words—the deft slide in and out of the point of view of the characters, the subtle play of irony, the nice discriminations of the narrator's analytic observations—would inevitably be flattened in the pictorial representation.

Biblical narrative, unlike the novel, does not use minute specification, but its very concision elevates ambiguity to a fine literary art. "And Isaac loved Esau because he had a taste for game. But Rebekah loved Jacob." The odd imbalance of this sentence invites us to ponder its implications, as the matching images in the graphic version do not. The material cause for Isaac's favoring Esau is peculiar, perhaps raising questions about the soundness of the old man's judgment. Rebekah's favoritism, on the other hand, is given no explanation, leading us, as so often happens with biblical characters, to speculate about motives. Is she fond of Jacob because he is the sedentary and—as we learn later—emotional son? Does she admire the quality of shrewdness she may perceive in him? Could she have some intuitive maternal sense that he is the one worthy of the birthright? Might she simply prefer smooth-skinned boys to hairy ones? This sort of hovering among possibilities is an essential element of the richness of biblical narrative.

A quasi-novelistic interest in the workings of consciousness, moreover, is often

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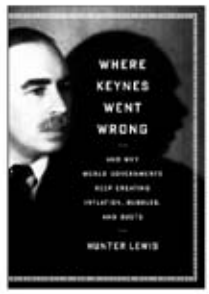

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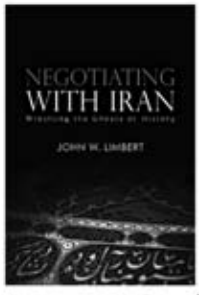

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manifested in biblical narrative in its brief interior monologues, in the narrator's report of inner states, and in the jumps from narration to dialogue, and this is another dimension of experience that does not fare well in graphic representation. When Joseph as regent of Egypt beholds his brothers prostrate before him, that sight triggers in him the memory of his double dream of predominance over them: "And Joseph remembered the dreams he had dreamed about them, and he said to them, 'You're spies! You've come to see the land's nakedness!' " The image of Joseph with a speech bubble filled with hieroglyphics over his head standing next to the interpreter scarcely does justice to the way the verbal narrative shows Joseph's mind leaping back to a crucial moment in his adolescence, nor to how that recollection sets off an explosive accusation—is it a spontaneous outburst of anger over remembered injustice or the beginning of a calculated scheme to torment his brothers into recognizing their guilt? The accusation, one should note, is couched in language that, with the family matrix still compelling consciousness, carries an intimation of incestuous violation (and it may be relevant that the firstborn brother Reuben has in fact slept with his father's concubine). At this point in the story, moreover, the narrator has not yet informed us of the presence of an interpreter, and the immediacy of Joseph's accusatory dialogue, felt as though he were speaking to his brothers in their native Hebrew, is extremely important for the psychological power of the moment. In this instance, the graphic representation actually deflects us from the complexity of the encounter.

Crumb's Genesis is a bold undertaking, and most readers will be grateful for the many delights afforded by its visual inventiveness. But every artistic medium takes advantage of its own resources, and these ancient Hebrew stories use the resonance and the reticence of well-chosen words to proliferate possibilities of meaning, and to create access to the inner zone of human experience in multifarious ways. They cannot be pinned down, which is one of the sources of their power and their beauty. ◆

William Deresiewicz
A GEEK GROWS IN BROOKLYN

CHRONIC CITY
By Jonathan Lethem
(Doubleday, 432 pp., $27.95)

My heart sank when I read the opening line of Jonathan Lethem's new novel. "I first met Perkus Tooth in an office," it reads. Oh no, I thought, not *that* again. Is he really going to drag us through the kind of genre exercise a cutesy name like "Perkus Tooth" connotes? Lethem's career was not supposed to be going like this. After banging out four science-fiction novels in as many years, he had graduated, with *Motherless Brooklyn* and *The Fortress of Solitude*, to a more mature realism. Genre elements still clung like packing chips to both works—detective fiction in *Motherless Brooklyn*, the last remnants of sci-fi, or so it seemed, in *Fortress*—but so stunning was the latter despite its flaws, so dense its every phrase with feeling and implication, that there seemed to be no going back. After successively closer approximations, the introverted boy from Boerum Hill, who flung himself into prodigies of pop-cultural absorption after the death of his strong-willed hippie mother a short while after his fourteenth birthday, had come home to his subject. Family dynamics and adolescent friendships; comic books and rock and roll; the word on the street, the throb of the city, the wounded edge where black meets white. Brooklyn sang, and Lethem vibrated like a reed. *You Don't Love Me Yet*, a facile rom-com set amidst the L.A. hipoisie, was a beach vacation we could have done without, but *Chronic City* promised a return to New York and, at more than four hundred pages, a resumption of high ambition.

And then, right off the bat, "Perkus Tooth." Still, the rest of the opening is reassuringly plausible, and squarely within the vein of its author's recent obsessions. Perkus turns out to be a stock Lethemite figure, the geek genius who inhabits a mental universe as jumbled with books, movies, music, and marijuana smoke as the grotty Batcave hideaway in which he passes most of his time. The adolescent Mingus in his *Fortress* basement, turning Dylan on to comics. Dylan himself, the novel's protagonist, who grows up to be a rock critic. Bedwin from *You Don't Love Me Yet*, who avoids eye contact, curls around his electric guitar like a salted slug, and spends his days re-watching Fritz Lang's *Human Desire* in a room "whose every surface was crazed with media," searching for secret messages.

Above all, Lethem himself, whose collection of personal essays, *The Disappointment Artist*, had copped to the omnivorously obsessive geekdom his novels everywhere imply. There seems to be little in twentieth-century art, high or low, that he hasn't absorbed and doesn't have an articulate opinion about: not just rock and comics and sci-fi, but soul and jazz, Hollywood and the art house, modernist fiction from both sides of the Atlantic, even painting (his father is an accomplished artist). The volume's penetrating but often candidly self-involved disquisitions on *Star Wars*, *The Searchers*, Cassavetes, Philip K. Dick, and much more finally suggest a person who saves his deepest emotional attachments for cultural artifacts. "Between marriages," he confesses, "I've reached such fevers of acquisition that I twice resorted to sleeping on mattresses laid not atop a box spring but a pallet of cartons."

Whatever the personal roots of Lethem's compulsions in temperament and trauma, geekdom also responds to a wider history. It is not simply fandom and was not fully possible before the 1970s, the decade in which Lethem grew up. Its scholarly posture awaited the erasure of high/low distinctions and the rise of a popular culture that thought enough of itself to elicit a corresponding critical seriousness. (The emergence in the academy of film studies and the like is a parallel phenomenon.) All of a sudden it was intellectually respectable to spin out theories about *Spiderman* or *I Dream of Jeannie*. And not just respectable, but necessary. The '70s also marked the moment when media culture reached a kind of saturation point, the age by which we found ourselves, as George W. S. Trow famously put it, within the context of no context. What Warhol intuited and Sontag theorized was now universal—and for children of the '70s, congenital. All media, all the time: commercials, billboards, boom boxes, Muzak, cable; hooks, jingles, icons, slogans, logos. Marilla, in *Fortress*, is a jukebox of musical catchphrases. Lionel Essrog, the tourettic narrator of *Motherless Brooklyn*, spits a steady stream of cultural detritus. Geekdom resists the informational avalanche through the impossible

William Deresiewicz writes essays and reviews for a variety of publications.

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strategy of seeking to master it—hence both its theoretical drive and the infinitude of its quest.

So it is with Tooth. Like Lethem's alter ego in *Fortress*, Perkus is, or was, a rock critic. Like Lethem himself, he writes liner notes for Criterion Collection re-releases of highbrow film classics. Having made a minor name a decade earlier as an auteur of sidewalk broadsides, hybrids of cultural critique, guerrilla theater, and public art, he is now holed up in an East 84th street sublet, obsessing about Mailer, Brando, the typography of *The New Yorker* ("to read the *New Yorker* was to find that you always agreed, not with the *New Yorker* but, much more dismayingly, with *yourself*"), and just about everything else, doing battle against complacency, conspiracy, and consensus with scissors, glue, and copious amounts of cheeba. If he can just connect enough dots, he can figure out what's going on behind the Potemkin flats of official reality.

Into his world and under the spell of his dialectical brilliance falls the novel's narrator, Chase Insteadman, a former child actor who has been killing time since he was about fifteen. A third soon joins their cabal of all-night bull sessions, Richard Abneg, tenants'-rights *tummler* turned mayoral flunky, clinging to his street cred while working for the Man. Three guys, then, two of them essentially unemployed and a third resisting maturity with facial hair and a Richard Hell ring tone. Perkus is a virgin; Chase sleeps around. Like Reg Loud in "Interview with the Crab," a 2005 short story, over forty but "still too young to be an adult"; like Lionel Essrog, well past his twenties but stutteringly stuck in lost-boy confusion; like Dylan Ebdus, stretching his umbilicus from Brooklyn to Berkeley—and yes, like their creator, as he is always the first to point out, and indeed, like just about everyone else in his (and my) generation (and the next one, and the next)—these men are failed adults, aging adolescents who still haven't figured out how to grow up:

> We were always . . . on the verge of some tremendous expedition, like Vikings spreading nautical charts across a knife-scarred table, laying plans for plunder. . . . We never budged from that kitchen, however, unless if [*sic*] it was to tumble out coughing into the fresh chill air, and around the corner, to pile into a booth at Jackson Hole for cheeseburgers and Cokes.

They might as well be stumbling out of a dormitory, except this time Lethem either doesn't notice or doesn't care. In *Fortress*, Dylan confesses that "my childhood is the only part of my life that wasn't, uh, overwhelmed by my childhood"; in *You Don't Love Me Yet*, adolescence hits a wall of adult reality; but here Lethem takes the situation at its own self-inflated assessment, as charmed by all the hijinks as Chase is himself.

It seems that the allure of brotherly bonding is simply too strong for him, no matter that the whole of adulthood be demanded in sacrifice. A profound loneliness lies at the center of his work, a sense of "the ocean of space which surrounds each human life." Comic-book panels, frames of celluloid, sidewalk slates, row house lots, city blocks: *Fortress of Solitude*—whose title, which comes from *Superman*, says it all—proliferates with images of self-enclosed adjacencies, where "meaning lurks in the gaps between." In *Chronic City*, the images of disconnection shift: ice floes, apartments, the Upper East Side (that psychologically gated community, where all the characters live and almost all the action takes place), above all the island of Manhattan itself.

At a climactic moment, Chase and Abneg exchange confessions through the bars of adjoining jail cells—a scene that replays a passage in *Fortress of Solitude*, and that could stand as an emblem of Lethem's vision of human relations. "*We* and *you* don't know a thing about what *I* felt back then," he writes about his boyhood communion with comics, "any more than *I* know a thing about what *you* felt." Geekdom, after all, is a form of solipsism, even—Perkus has a nephew who is "on the spectrum"—of autism. Whether the loss of his mother be to blame for this irredeemable sense of isolation it boots not to ask, for the feeling is no less general now than our universal allegiance to Peter Pan. Indeed, the two go together. Maybe if we can hold off growing up for just a little bit longer, we seem to think, we can finally find the family that we have never felt we had.

Which is, of course, what's going on in *Chronic City*. Chase worships Perkus like an older brother. Abneg, the responsible one, plays the daddy role. A fourth figure edges into their orbit, a woman named Oona Laszlo, a feisty, sarcastic celebrity ghostwriter, whose fast-flaring liaison with Chase does not prevent her from filling the kid-sister slot, the one girl admitted to the tree house. Like the car-service-cum-detective-agency of orphaned man-boys in *Motherless Brooklyn* or the rock band in *You Don't Love Me Yet*, this bundle of unmoored souls constitutes the substitute family to which the book gives its heart.

The problem, however, is the same as before. Just as the novel whistles past the fact that its principal characters are all cases of arrested development, treating them like perfectly plausible adults, so does it ignore the meaning of their collocation—which is to say, of its own emotional needs. The final essay in *The Disappointment Artist*, which is also its most candid and moving, is called "The Beards." The title refers to a group of young men, all bearded in the '70s style, whom Lethem befriended after his mother's death, but it also picks up the slang sense of the word brought back by Woody Allen in *Broadway Danny Rose* and since popularized to denote the companions of closeted celebrities: "A cloak on passions that those who required a beard might be unwilling to discuss or even consider." In Lethem's quicksilver reading of his own life, the notion becomes a master metaphor for all his important moves. His immersion in popular culture was a beard for high-art ambitions; his embrace of serious film and fiction was a beard for adolescence, a desire to get it over with before it even started; the beards themselves, those three young men, were a beard for his love for his parents. Most of all, writing itself has been a beard for loss, an attempt to avoid the real issue by talking about anything but. And yet in retrospect he sees that "I find myself speaking about my mother's death everywhere I go in this world."

Chase, too, has a secret, which he contrives to confess in such a way that nobody hears him. Essrog hawks up bits of his psyche—inspired, garbled wordplay that no one else can understand. Art, Lethem knows, is an attempt to conceal by revealing, and reveal by concealing: to confess, as it were, inaudibly. "I want what we all want," says Carl in *You Don't Love Me Yet*, the novel's one true artist, "to move certain parts of the interior of myself into the external world, to see if they can be embraced." *Chronic City* puts the matter more urgently. Perkus, assembling his first broadside in years, places a picture of a polar bear stranded on a raft of ice in the center of a blank sheet of paper. Next to it, he lays a block of type reading thus:

> *Perhaps such secrets, the secrets of everyone, were only expressed when the person laboriously dragged them*

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into the light of the world, imposed them on the world, and made them a part of the world's experience. Without this effort, the secret place was merely a dungeon in which the person perished.…

From the prison of isolation, the only escape is art. Yet the story, as difficult as it is, is not that simple. The confession Chase wants to both make and suppress is not—though he doesn't know it—actually true. No one else can figure out what Essrog's tic-blurts mean, and neither can he. Behind the secrets we keep from others are the ones we conceal from ourselves. "Before all my arrogant poems," Whitman wrote, "the real Me stands yet untouch'd, untold, altogether unreach'd."

So why, then, write at all? Because the quest to reach the real Me, doomed though it is, supplies the energy of artistic discovery. *Fortress* is mighty because it wrestles with Lethem's dark angels. *Chronic City* is feeble because it everywhere avoids that confrontation. This is a book that seems to have no idea what it is really about. Its heart belongs to its stunted adults and the makeshift family that they cobble together, but its mind—its far-too-busy mind—is, like theirs, somewhere else altogether. The book has more beards than a Hell's Angels chapter.

For I can no longer shirk the lamentable task of telling you about the plot. The baleful implications of the first sentence are, we quickly find, all too fully realized. Chase, it turns out, has a fiancé named Janice who just happens to be an astronaut marooned in space by a low-altitude field of Chinese mines. Oona is ghosting the memoirs of a sculptor named Laird Noteless, who specializes in hacking enormous ravines into the ground and is currently at work on a *Memorial to Daylight* in the financial district. Abneg, expelled from his apartment by a pair of eagles who've decided to nest on the windowsill, makes excuses for his Jewish billionaire boss and gets involved with an Armenian heiress named Georgina Hawkmanji. Meanwhile the whole city is in a funk from the Gray Fog that has been stalled over lower Manhattan for the past two or three years (the novel begins in 2004), a winter that won't lift no matter what the calendar says and a giant tiger that's been ravaging the Upper East Side from below ground and may have something to with the construction of a new subway line—calamities that even *The New York Times* War Free edition can't elide, though compensation arrives in the form of a mysterious chocolate odor that some experience as a tone.

Are you getting this down? Good, because it all takes second place to the "chaldrons"—hypnotically beautiful orange vases that Perkus discovers on eBay and that set off a frenzy of bliss and greed among himself and his friends. And all this in the first third of the book, setting up some highly suspenseful questions: will Janice make it back to Earth? Is the "tiger" really an animal? What is the mayor hiding? Will our heroes track down a chaldron of their own? And most importantly—given the fact that none of these characters possesses a more than notional presence—does Lethem really expect us to care about any of this?

New Yorkers and others will recognize the plot as a dog's dinner of topical concerns: Michael Bloomberg; the Second Avenue subway project, which has been playing havoc with local businesses; Pale Male, the red-tailed hawk who nests on a Fifth Avenue co-op and whose attempted removal raised an outcry in 2004; the maple-syrup smell that showed up the following year and has been traced to factories across the Hudson; even last year's crane collapses, thumbed in late in the game. Not to mention gentrification, global warming, the financial crisis, the Internet, Iraq and Afghanistan, the rise of China, and of course—for what novel today would be complete without it?—September 11.

On this snarl of scaffolding Lethem attempts to erect some tall ideas. The gang discovers an online simulation game called "Yet Another World"—not "Another World," "Yet Another," as if there already were any number. "Something happened," Perkus says, "there was some rupture in this city. Since then … we've been living in a place that's a replica of itself, a fragile simulacrum, full of gaps and glitches." (That's how the speech appears—Perkus has a wicked case of hiccups, in case we are having trouble getting the point.) Chase, chewing this over, eructs the following epiphany:

> By recent measures the city was orderly, flush with money, a little boring, even. That was, if you trusted the complacent testimony of the millions who checked TigerWatch in the morning before donning their April snowshoes and subwaying to work as usual, then in the evenings filled the bars and restaurants, or stayed home to watch *The Sopranos* or the Yankees, speed-dialing to stir Chinese delivery bicyclists to flight.… The only conspiracy was a conspiracy of distraction. The conspirers, ourselves.

Comparable passages besprinkle the book, all tending to the same conclusions. The media is a lie, the world is a puppet show manipulated for the benefit of the rich and powerful, reality is unstable and personal identity along with it. We're all just insteadmen, simulacra of ourselves—acting out our roles, oblivious, in yet another world.

This really is dorm-room stuff, ontology by bong hit, the kind of paranoia that Philip K. Dick specialized in and that eventually sucked him into its vortex. Perkus literally comes to believe that the world beyond Manhattan has become untenable, a fallout-strewn wasteland or Chinese slave dictatorship. One would suppose that Lethem means to satirize all this, especially since the last bit sounds like a Brooklyn boy's parody of Manhattan provincialism. But the novel is utterly innocent of ironic inflection, and let's not forget that Dick is one of Lethem's heroes. As the story progresses, we discover with slackening jaw that Perkus's view is essentially vindicated—if not as regards the business about the off-island world (which can in any case be understood as an allegory of individual isolation), then still with respect to his essential philosophical position. "Pincus Truth," he is mistakenly called, and at the very limit of his raving. Only the mad, it turns out, are truly sane, just like R. D. Laing tried to tell us. Chase's teenage TV show was titled *Martyr & Pesty*, with the ultimate suggestion that in his and Perkus's long-running serial, the former plays the pest, the latter the saint who sufferers so that he may see the light. Perkus and Abneg were partners in crime at Horace Mann (once again, everything for Lethem comes back to high school). *Les Deux Non-Dupes*, Abneg tells Chase they styled themselves, the two non-dupes, their slogan, "*Les Non-Dupes Refusé.*"

If this actually were science fiction, we would at least know where we stood with respect to it all. Sci-fi sets up an alternative world, with self-consistent rules, to which our world is presumed to bear some kind of allegorical relationship. But Lethem wants it both ways, just as he did—it was the novel's major weakness—in *Fortress of Solitude*. He wants realism, with the credibility it brings—wants us to take the world of the novel as a faithful copy of the world we know—but he also wants to stack the deck by deploying supernatural elements whenever he finds it convenient. In *Fortress of Solitude*, that meant a magic ring that conferred, now invisibility, now the power

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of flight. Here it means any number of things, popping up at random: endless winters, giant tigers, buildings that move when you're not looking. And the novel's psychology is no less capricious than its physics. If something's on the loose destroying buildings, why isn't the city in an uproar? If the Chinese have sown a field of orbital mines to destroy the U.S.-Russian space station, why aren't we in the middle of World War III? Most annoyingly, Chase's sense of inauthenticity—which is to say, his whole story—turns out to hinge on a degree of amnesia and susceptibility to psychological manipulation that are simply impossible to accept absent evidence of actual brain damage.

Some of this is transparently allegorical (global freezing equals global warming, of course), some of it has a vaguely satiric cast, like a third-rate version of *Brazil* (Lethem's city adjusts to the depredations of the tiger just as the real city accepts the ravages of gentrification), and much of it is simply opaque, but all of it, in its wild inconsistency, creates a generic instability that renders the authorial contract void. We are willing to suspend disbelief, but we are not willing to be conned. Pynchon writes about paranoia and conspiracy, too, but he does it the hard way, laboriously pursuing the occult connections that might actually underlie the world we live in. Dick, at his best, gives us imagined worlds we receive with a shudder of recognition. But *Chronic City* is set neither in our New York nor a future New York, simply in one that Lethem makes up as he goes along. Given what's happening in his world, Chase is right to feel reality slipping away from him. And we are equally right to feel that his world has nothing to say to our own. *Les non-dupes refusé.*

The cheating doesn't stop there. *Chronic City* is written in the first person, Chase's puzzled narrative—except when it isn't. When Chase loses sight of his friend, the story simply follows Perkus, in the third person, until they meet again, with no explanation of where the second voice comes from. Chase is a former child actor with no higher education that we know of and no apparent intellectual interests, yet he produces language like this:

> These guessing-words I find junked in my brain in deranged juxtaposition, like files randomly stuffed into cabinets by a dispirited secretary with no notion of what, if anything, might ever be usefully retrieved. Often all language seems this way: a monstrous compendium of embedded histories I'm helpless to understand.

Somehow I can't imagine that coming from, say, Scott Baio or Danny Bonaduce.

But the surest sign that Lethem is flying with a depleted jet pack is the quality of his prose. To be sure, there are still some lovely aperçus, especially when he gets out of the house and onto the streets he sees so well. On the Upper East Side: "If one of money's laws is that it can never buy taste, here is where it went after it failed, and here's what it bought instead." On the cops at the scene of an accident: "Each player on this stage of chaos had a line or two they were made to deliver ad infinitum, while we, the audience, filtered among them, gathering these coupons like stamps in an album." On Perkus's encounter with a self-pitying private-school graduate: "He'd never been able to rouse his sympathy for anyone who'd gone to Dalton no matter how sulky they felt about it."

But these are rare stops on an otherwise monotonous ride. *Motherless Brooklyn* starts like this: "Context is everything. Dress me up and see." *Fortress of Solitude* starts like this: "Like a match struck in a darkened room…." You know how *Chronic City* starts, and the same tone, as flat as an old futon—joyless, humorless, forceless, lifeless—predominates throughout. Sometimes the prose is merely clumsy: "He pulled out a chair at his small, linoleum-topped table like that you'd see in a diner"; "He connected by his phone-line, which he transferred by hand from his living-room Slimline, and which bumped him offline if anyone rang"; "The hordes of new players arriving every day drove the ratio of chaldron-to-player scarcity continually through the roof." Often, though, it's amateurishly paraphrastic or overwrought, as if to slap itself awake. Tired eyes become "aggravated orbs"; single malt scotch, "amber poison"; Spiderman, "the blue-and-red superhero." "The mystery of a building as grand as this one," we read, "was as deep as anything locked in the tormented gazes of the taxidermied dead"; "I wanted to tell him to ease himself, not try to talk, but that would be as if to tell him to fold the only tent he'd ever set up on the windswept desert of existence"; and "this Warren Zoom [Chase's childhood character] struck the viewer … as possessing some quantity of life outside the cold frame of the screen, beyond the rigid limits of what shadow plays could be mounted within that half-hour frame in the usual

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attempt to placate, amuse, and sell what needed selling."

This is sentimentalism, not sentiment—an effort to force or fake the emotional connection that Lethem has failed to establish with his material. A persistent sense of "insteadness" shadows the book. Just as its language announces more feeling than it transmits, just as its characters mime relationships that are more intimate than the ones they have, so do its intellectual concerns stand in for a more urgent—and in Lethem's work, more familiar—set of anxieties. Chase is not the first of Lethem's protagonists to suffer what the actor calls a "crisis of authenticity." But this time we're looking in the wrong direction. The novel's preoccupation with the elusiveness of metaphysical reality is a beard for the elusiveness, for its privileged characters, of social reality. Of course Chase feels that his life isn't real. It isn't. He lives off a trickle of royalties from work he did in the distant past. Perkus is no different—subsidized, it turns out, by the family business. The characters float on a cloud of fine wine and cab rides, wondering where the world went. The Upper East Side, indeed. Dylan—the real one—has a few lines that Lethem undoubtedly knows: "And the princess and the prince / Discuss what's real and what is not / It doesn't matter inside the Gates of Eden."

The fictional Dylan was more forthright about the stakes. His "rage for authenticity" was rooted, he avowed, in Brooklyn, in the feeling that to don the cape of privilege and fly off to Manhattan and Stuyvesant, Vermont and "Camden" (i.e., Bennington), Berkeley and the Bay was to abandon not only the people he had grown up with, but ultimately also his true self. Beneath the ache of inauthenticity, then—beneath just about everything in Lethem—lies the circular labyrinth of guilt. It is liberal guilt, and in Chase's hackneyed and entirely predictable scorn for the superrich for whom he serves as parlor decoration, we detect the gravitational field of its displacement. But it is also—or really—something more: remorse not just for having more, but for having at all, for having needs, for having been born. It is the guilt of the child, the burden of the unpayable debt we owe our parents. It is grandiose, the other side of self-pity, and it is also unreal, a breeder of phantoms, always searching for a crime it never committed, always blurting a confession it can never complete. *Fortress of Solitude* plunged into this miasma and came out with art; *Chronic City* lets it linger like a vapor that obscures its own source.

Guilt's double, of course, is innocence, and here we see a deeper sense to Lethem's adolescent characters and postures. His protagonists, Chase among them, tend to be naïfs, sidekicks, dupes—passive victims of the world's grown-up wickedness. But remember that his figures are not just young, they are somehow young and old at the same time. Reg Loud doesn't just seem "too young to be an adult," he also seems "far too old to be in his early forties," as if withered by a pretense of guilelessness, Dorian Gray and his portrait superimposed on the same image. By dressing his work in sneakers and jeans—comic-book colors and pop-culture paradigms, sci-fi shenanigans and detective-fiction simplicities—by always backing away from realism's self-incriminating awareness of the dirty human heart, Lethem makes the same disavowal.

"Innocence" means two different things, and one implies the other: if you're callow, you're guiltless. At forty-five, Lethem has yet to give us a single real adult relationship. And yet there is one little moment, in one short story, that hints at the knowledge—at the appetites—he works so hard to disclaim. "As I get older," says the narrator, who resembles his creator,

> I find that the friendships that are the most certain, ultimately, are the ones where you and the other person have made substantial amounts of money for one another.... My Hollywood agent is about my age, and when I talk to him I feel he knows who I am, because he helped make me who I am.

It goes by in a flash, but it makes us realize that Lethem's beardless innocence may be his biggest beard of all. It is one thing to acknowledge loss, however painful, and quite another to confess to ambition, to envy, to greed.

Passivity and dependence call forth their opposites in the form of the hero—the defining figure, of course, of the comic book. The child dreams of superpowers, or else, of a savior. Heroism is not just action, it is morally unambiguous action—adult power without adult guilt. The drama of heroism and hero-worship plays out in work after work of Lethem's corpus. (It is also playing out, not incidentally, in our president's relationship to his young votaries, that legion of hopeful children.) Dylan worships Mingus, only one grade ahead but supernaturally cooler; Essrog worships Frank Minna, the small-time hood who saves him from his orphanage; Chase worships Perkus, the dauntless thinker who explains him to himself. And Lethem, we infer, worshipped the "beards." For an oldest child, he has quite the younger-brother complex, yet the dynamic is readily explicable in generational terms. To grow up in the '70s was to be fated to a permanent condition of younger-siblinghood: to worship the '60s, that mythic time of heroic action, whether you wanted to or not—as Lethem, raised in a nimbus of hippie revolutionaries, had more reason than most to do.

The situation is beautifully captured in "Super Goat Man," perhaps his best short story. The title character, born plain old Ralph Gersten, decides to become a superhero around the time that JFK is shot. (For once, Lethem smoothly meshes realism and the fantastic.) He never does accomplish very much, though, and after retiring to a Brooklyn commune, where the narrator remembers him from childhood, he takes up an academic post, teaching

Nobody's Sonnet

Nobody understands when I write in the dark.
When nobody writes in the dark I understand.

I write in the dark when nobody understands.
In the dark when I understand nobody writes.

I understand when nobody writes in the dark.
When I write in "nobody" the dark understands.

I understand when the dark in nobody writes.
Understand the dark in nobody when I write.

When in the dark I write nobody, understand?
I write: when in nobody, the dark understands.

When I write in dark the nobody understands.
When in nobody I understand the dark writes.

The dark nobody writes in—I understand when.
In the dark, write: when I understand nobody.

Nobody understands when I write in the dark.
Nobody understands when I write the dark in.

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a course titled "Dissidence and Desire: Marginal Heroics in American Life 1955–1975." Eventually, he is humiliated by a couple of frat boys and then, in his dotage, repudiated by the narrator himself. In short, a perfectly cunning allegory of the career of the counterculture's pretensions to transformative action, and of the next generation's relationship to them. It never was all that much, Lethem suggests, and we never were as impressed as you wanted us to be. And yet, here he is, still writing legends of the fall. Minna, Mingus, and Perkus: all of them end up smashed by the system one way or another, leaving their acolytes to pick up the pieces. Our heroes diminish us, yet we cannot live without them.

But what happens when you become the hero? Lethem's work has been haunted of late by the figure of (as the title of his essay collection puts it) the disappointment artist—the creator who burns out early or never lives up to his potential in the first place. Edward Dahlberg, the mid-century American novelist whose portrait gives that volume its name, is one example; Mingus's father, the washed-up soul singer whose presence looms over *Fortress of Solitude*, is another. In *Chronic City*, we meet such figures at every turn: Chase himself; Russ Grinspoon, "the lamer half of a well-forgotten seventies smooth-rock duo"; most of all, both Perkus and his number-one hero—for, Chase thinks, "that Brando had frittered away much of his prime gave them something in common." *You Don't Love Me Yet* was a minor failure; *Chronic City* is a major one. The boy who wanted to grow up so fast that he ended up feeling as if he'd never grown up at all has become a richly gifted artist who worries that his best years are behind him. His recent output gives us all too much reason to fear the same. ◆

David Thomson
SHORT CUTS

ROBERT ALTMAN: THE ORAL BIOGRAPHY
By Mitchell Zuckoff
(Knopf, 592 pp., $35)

Here is your exam question: who is the last American movie director who made thirty-nine films but never won the Oscar for best director? Name the film by that director that cost the most money, and name the film of his that earned the most. Clue: *The Departed*, which must have been around Martin Scorsese's thirtieth picture, and did win the directing Oscar, cost $90 million (four times as much as any of this man's films cost)—so don't go that way. Background info: *Gosford Park* cost $15 million; *Nashville* cost $2.2 million; *M.A.S.H.* cost about $3.5 million, and earned around $70 million; *Popeye* cost $20 million (in 1980). Here is your assignment: assess and reconcile these allegations in an essay of approximately 3,000 words. (Note: banish from your mind any insinuation that nowadays a director who makes thirty-nine films *has* to be given a best director Oscar—though it is not easy to think of many that fecund who don't have a bronze fetish to nurse at night.)

So while you have something useful to do, let's consider Mitchell Zuckoff's book on Robert Altman. In the recent history of rather stale or perfunctory books about movie directors, Zuckoff has done something quite special. Although the author is not known as a writer on film, he shows an unusual sense of the collaborations and the conflicts in a group process. Also, he grasps the way in which Altman was always inclined to make a battleground of his own projects—the earnest but passionate misunderstandings between Altman and Warren Beatty on *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* are so beautifully rendered that we begin to see how the actor's notion of John McCabe and the director's had to be at odds for that film to be so funny and so poignant. This is a smart, amusing, lively book, full of anecdotes and a generous step toward perceiving the glorious and perverse ways of Altman himself. I hope the book prospers, because that will assist the enjoyment of some complex films, and because Zuckoff's achievement is preparation for a full appreciation of what Patrick McGilligan delivered in his book *Robert Altman: Jumping Off the Cliff*, which appeared twenty years ago. (Zuckoff falls short of the obligation of "biography" by not even mentioning the earlier book.)

Today Altman is regarded with automatic respect. As a film-maker, he worked past the age of seventy-five (despite a heart transplant). He eventually won an honorary Oscar from the Academy for a career "that has repeatedly reinvented the art form." And, compared with the outlaw celebrated by McGilligan, we know Altman as the director of *The Player*, *Short Cuts*, and *Gosford Park*, major works in the estimate of most critics and all coming after 1989. Let us remember that when McGilligan jumped off the cliff of taste, his subject's most recent works had been *HealtH*; *Popeye*; *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*; *Streamers*; *Secret Honor*; *Fool for Love*; *Beyond Therapy*; and *O.C. and Stiggs*. There is something to be said for some of those films—*Secret Honor*, *Jimmy Dean*, even *Popeye*—but the greatest Altman enthusiasts would admit that this was the period of his doldrums. Yes, he kept working under adverse financial conditions, and nearly everything he did was "unexpected," but in general the gap between *Nashville* and *The Player*, 1975 to 1991, is one in which Altman seems adrift, or more than uncommonly out of love with himself and the world. It is a period that has to be accounted for in any analysis of his greatness as an artist.

Altman was eighty-one when he died, in 2006, which places him in the generation of American directors shaped by World War II and the remarkable place of cinema in the testing days of the 1930s and 1940s. He was born and brought up in Kansas City, and he was a pilot at the tag end of the Pacific war, a member of a crew, and someone who survived great peril in flimsy aircraft. It made a gambler out of him—or someone who declined to be as responsible as others. He was a big handsome kid who ran through a couple of early marriages as he took up documentary film-making at the Calvin company in Kansas City, a Midwest business for industrial films—but no fiction. This was rare training, and every biographical account testifies to how far some early ties lasted for decades in Altman's life. But it is striking that he did not really "go" Hollywood. Calvin was a robust, independent company in the non-fiction field, and a place where Altman learned everything he needed about the techniques of film.

Where do film directors come from? When you ask that question, you begin

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to grasp Altman's maverick nature. Directors came from good schools—Joseph Losey and Bob Rafelson were Dartmouth; Elia Kazan was Williams College; Howard Hawks was Cornell. There were some from the military—William Wellman, Henry Hathaway, Sam Fuller. There were kids who somewhere or other immersed themselves in show business from the earliest age, learning everything—Hitchcock, Minnelli, Ford. Some were refugees—Wyler, Zinnemann, Wilder. There even came a time, in the 1960s, when would-be directors strolled in and out of film school—Bogdanovich, Coppola, Lucas—as if bypassing life. There were also people who came out of the theater—radical, experimental, wayward souls such as Orson Welles, Nicholas Ray, or Preston Sturges. And in America there had always been the tradition of the adventurer who had tried a bit of everything, who had written or acted on stage, who boxed, rode horses, gambled and searched for gold—John Huston is the champion of that school, and it followed that Huston seldom agreed with, say, Hitchcock that making movies was the only possible occupation in the world.

Robert Altman fit none of these molds, just as he never managed to conform to the image of a Hollywood director. At school he was not much taken with anything except pranks and mischief. He liked to have a good time and he enjoyed the facilities of that philosophy—a little booze, some girls, late nights, and spare time. He had an instinct for moviemaking, proved on training films at Calvin, and occasionally he decided that he really ought to try Hollywood. But several visits in the post war years came to nothing. He was busy and well-intentioned, but sort of aimless—is it possible that he never took himself that seriously? A few years later, he admitted that "I started in the film business not too long ago, right here on this soundstage. It was a stormy beginning, and as I remember, I was in such a hurry to 'make it' that I often forgot to stand still long enough to do what it was I was trying to do. I'm not sure—even today—that I knew what it was I was trying to do, but I do know that I tried very, very hard, and ran around and around my goal until either I or it became like tigers turning into a circle of melted butter. And never once stopping to wonder what it was I was chasing—or was it, by then, chasing me."

Ambition in movies was supposed to be more sharply focused, but Altman seemed to exist in his own haze. Gradually, during the 1950s and early 1960s, he gathered real credits: he did a bad picture called *The Delinquents*, and that got him the co-directing job on a maudlin documentary, *The James Dean Story*. (But there was no hint that Altman identified with Dean, or his troubled generation, or the mawkish theme song on the Dean film—"Let Me Be Loved.") He did some work directing television and he made a sci-fi picture called *Countdown*. What that meant was that as he came to make *M.A.S.H.*, in 1970, he was already forty-five—in a movie world in which people such as Coppola, Lucas, Scorsese, Bogdanovich, and Spielberg were getting their break at half his age. Was the Kansas City man a late developer, or a drummer who moved to his own lazy beat?

Altman nearly missed out on *M.A.S.H.* He was not well known enough. There were arguments that it was right for Stanley Kubrick. But two friends, George Litto and Ingo Preminger, carried the day, despite the studio's refusal to give Altman any points on profits. Then the picture was a breakout hit after Fox had thought it would need a lot of changes. Riotous preview screenings showed that Altman's insouciance and irreverence had caught a new young mood of 1970. So the military field hospital in Korea abandoned every hallowed sense of duty and respect. It treated the doctoring as a bloody job for hip young guys worried about tee times and fucking nurses. Of course it was truer to life than any war comedy had ever been, and beneath the blood and the wisecracks it was easy to mistake Korea for Vietnam—who really knew, when it had been shot at Malibu and in the L.A. canyons? *M.A.S.H.* was a merciless celebration of a men's club—perhaps the only sane way to handle a war—and was so steadily funny that audiences were either offended or charmed. But they were never indifferent. As much as any movie of the 1970s, *M.A.S.H.* divided the crowd—and though it got a best-picture nomination and a nod for Altman himself, the grindingly archaic *Patton* won those Oscars. In hindsight, we are left wishing that the inspired teasing and disrespect of Donald Sutherland and Elliott Gould could be ladled over the pomp of George C. Scott!

M.A.S.H. came from a novel that the distinguished scenarist Ring Lardner Jr. had adapted. But then Altman proceeded to trash and re-do Lardner's script—the Oscar was the writer's reward, said the deadpan Altman. At last a personal style was at work: the film was an excuse for an ensemble in which outward codes of rank and duty were dismantled by improvisation and insurrection. The players refused to take anything seriously, and Altman reduced everyone to the level of "support." All of a sudden you could detect an attitude in Altman that most set-piece American movies were stuffed, and deserved deflation and deconstruction. In time *M.A.S.H.* was a smash (the only one of Altman's career), and so liberating that it paved the way for a TV series that increasingly settled for the sweet routines of character, comedy, and anti-war sentiments. The astonishing thing about the movie *M.A.S.H.*—and Altman made not a penny from the TV show—is that it did not even bother to be anti-war.

Neither McGilligan nor Zuckoff really explains how the breakthrough of *M.A.S.H.* changed Altman, or directed him. In part, this is because both authors found him elusive, rather less than honest, an opportunist, a man who rarely liked to reflect (in public) on his inner being or processes, but someone who could take steady advantage of all those around him. Altman does not make a natural or a comforting hero. He was a drinker, a marijuana connoisseur, a womanizer, a regular exploiter of his own writers. He seems to have had an innate antagonism to the storytelling contribution of his scripts. In interviews Altman could be skittish. Was he unreliable, forgetful, or stoned? In 1975 (after *Nashville*), this prompted a searching essay by Robin Wood called "Smart-ass and Cutie-pie," on how far Altman was an artist or just a whimsical man at play. Wood's point remains valid, and it is sad that Zuckoff never picks it up. As with his own best characters, some sense endures of Altman as a lost soul or a bereft nihilist. He was also something of a fraud.

Yet a lot was revealed by the success of *M.A.S.H.* An astonishing calm and self-confidence—an arrogance nearly—took over in a series of films in which Altman pursued intense personal fantasy or began to strip the old wallpaper from Hollywood genres. Once lackadaisical or casual, he now seemed impassioned and driven: *Brewster McCloud*; *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*; *Images*; *The Long Goodbye*; *Thieves Like Us*; *California Split*; *Nashville*; *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*; *3 Women*. It is one of the great runs of work in American film. The Chandler film is a satire on or a travesty of private-eye pictures, and *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* might be re-titled *How the West Was Lost*; and all these movies caught the audience off guard. As a bicentenary picture, *Buffalo Bill* was an exposé of all the hype and fraud in Americana. Rather than a tribute to country music and its spirit,

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Nashville was a pastiche in which any actor could and did write a country hit song. Country music hated the picture.

And just to torment the industry aroused by that $70 million take on *M.A.S.H.*, the next nine films were disasters, flops, near misses, or half-hits. The blithe pattern of Altman's career was established, well in advance of the "independent" movement in American cinema. If he could somehow find the money to make a film—albeit at his own ground level, where big names contributed themselves for scale—he hardly cared about the result. He would never recapture the fiscal dynamic of *M.A.S.H.*, but he would never go to ground, or stop working.

There was more going on. Often using wide screens, Altman was developing a drifting camera style that roamed around its own imagery. He seemed sometimes to ooze in and out of his own film world. The cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond was vital to this effort, but just as important was the way Altman began to mix multi-track sound recordings so that the sound focus seemed to move, with the result that no one could be quite sure what was said or heard. The creative climax of this style must be *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, where Warren Beatty, the precise, controlling actor, grew increasingly angry and flummoxed that audiences could not hear every word he was agonizing over. Altman was nonchalant about the blur or the fuzz—it was a strength, he said, it was just like life. His films were becoming like a shifting surface, a labyrinth of ambiguity in which very little was fixed or certain. He was also rejecting the idea—the old Hollywood scheme—that films and life are about just a few people. Life, Altman insisted, is always a ragged circle in which anything that happens is contingent on how it registers on others. Misunderstanding may be a surer path of existence than the old tidy understanding.

Many people said that seeing an Altman picture was like being in a haze, a daze, a drug trip. For every claim that the style was ushering in a new openness of attitude, there were counters that it was just a lazy, dreamy director incapable of making up his mind. That is why the director-star conflict on *McCabe* goes to the heart of the film: is McCabe a tragic hero or a hopeless chump? Does Altman care, and is he trying to get us to care, or does nothing really matter in the drift? Mrs. Miller's opium habit promotes the same detachment.

The argument is still open over the group of films as a whole. *Nashville*—much praised in its day by Pauline Kael, who lashed herself to Altman's uncertain mast (thereby guaranteeing her subsequent betrayal)—looks like a perilously chic contrivance, with twenty-four characters for the sake of that many, vivid in performance but very sketchy in writing, and in a languid circus that needs the sudden intrusion of assassination to give it shape and an ending. So *Nashville* may be overrated. On the other hand, *The Long Goodbye* and *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* are surely among the most beautiful and musical films ever made. Altman loved music, and jazz especially (see the jam session movie that goes along with *Kansas City*), and *Goodbye* and *McCabe* are eccentric musicals—with one refrain all through the first and Leonard Cohen's mutterings in the other. Moreover, Altman had reached a visionary insight that while Warren Beatty was a piercing but neurotic movie star, Elliott Gould's Philip Marlowe was quite simply one of the hippest pieces of acting in the annals of film.

The Altman of those years was like Ingmar Bergman in the way he had gathered a creative family. It was a gang of oddball actors who had never quite found themselves elsewhere: Gould, Keith Carradine, Geraldine Chaplin, Henry Gibson, Shelley Duvall, Jeff Goldblum, and Lily Tomlin, awkward in everyone else's films, but stunning for Altman. And he had his team behind the camera too, variously co-producers, co-writers, co-friends, and enablers—Tommy Thompson, Joan Tewkesbury, Robert Eggenweiler, Scott Bushnell, and Alan Rudolph. He was a producer for friends—and so he helped such valuable people as Alan Rudolph (*Remember My Name*) and Robert Benton (*The Late Show*), and much later there was a friendship and artistic alliance between Altman and Paul Thomas Anderson. It seemed a happy family until, all of a sudden, Bushnell sought more power and all was upheaval. Both McGilligan and Zuckoff do pretty well at tracing the internecine politics and the odd escapism with which Altman was a capricious emperor who would distribute favors and then give you the back of his hand.

He was not always an easy or safe man to like, or take for granted. The two books show very different experiences. Zuckoff was hired, he says, near the end of Altman's life, to help write a memoir that would make a nice payday. (Altman was always short of money.) It was to be a book about the work, not the life. They had long sessions of talk and smoking. They became friends, and Zuckoff succumbed to comradeship with an old man who was frail but persevering. Altman's great kindness to Zuckoff was in dying, for that took away any chance of chagrin and dismay in an abused author. But Zuckoff was persuaded by Altman's loyal and long-suffering third wife, Kathryn, and by opportunity, to do a book about the life, too—and to do it as an oral biography, adapting to the director's habit of a circular form and letting everyone have his or her say, even if it comes down to Faye Dunaway's official kiss-off—"I don't have anything to say about Mr Altman. I never worked with him. I don't have any time to give you on the subject"—instead of deep dish on the temperature of their implausible affair.

Zuckoff is a good interviewer and a better editor of the results. But his circle of contacts is smaller than McGilligan's, and it does not carry the bitterness of McGilligan's discovery: that the self-serving haze of forgetfulness in Altman's life often demanded a painstaking readiness to track down the small people who could give the lie to the great man's lofty and sentimental version of things. The McGilligan book is finally more revealing, because its author was never taken in by Altman or smothered in his embrace.

In the end there is room for both books, because Altman's best films and his rather chilly elegance have entered our imaginary existence. Very few directors have been so good at detecting the lonely people in the crowd. Beatty's John McCabe seems like the cock of his jaunty walk, yet he yarns away to himself to prove he exists; Gould's Philip Marlowe is so twisted out of shape by old codes of honor that he may have his best conversations with his cat. Altman left traps in the ground around himself: no major director made so many awful films. But if some director had made only *M.A.S.H.*, *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, *The Long Goodbye*, *3 Women*, and *Short Cuts*, there would be no doubt about his ultimate importance. Yes, he was a trickster and a tricky bastard, a bit of a double-cross. But do not forget that he introduced those lifelike realities at the very moment when innocent and foolish film followers were ready to believe that directors must be heroes, saints, or Santa Claus. We owe him plenty. ◆

ANTHONY RUSSO

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Washington Diarist

The Trend in Dying

"Happy is the eye that saw all this, but our souls were anguished by what our ear heard." This is the refrain of an ancient poem in the liturgy of Yom Kippur, a lament for its author's belatedness. It concludes the extraordinary verse narrative of the primal service, long ago lost, at the Temple in Jerusalem—the most awesome hour in early Judaism, when the High Priest ventured into the Holy of Holies and uttered the otherwise unutterable Divine Name, and answered the assembly's affirmation of the Name with the exhortation, "Be cleansed!"; and the most awful hour, when this same numinous figure picked up a knife and murdered a bullock and a goat and a few rams, and sprinkled blood in choreographed patterns of sanguinary absolution, and mixed the blood, and sent the scapegoat over a desert cliff to be shattered "like potter's ware." When I was a boy, I watched old men cry over these passages. It was their distance they were weeping for: they wished to see but they only heard. It is said that Rabbi Abraham Kook—infamous in our day as the idol of the settlers' movement, but in fact one of the great spiritual writers, one of the most light-saturated souls, of the twentieth century—sobbed at the remains of the Temple, at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, because of the priestly service that its destruction had denied him. This always struck me as rather a narrow focus on the Judean catastrophe. And in so radiant a being, why the nostalgia for the knife? I am glad that the knife is gone. I am happy only to hear about it, and my soul would be anguished were my eyes to see it. When my attention wandered in shul—it always does, I am no good at prayer, I lack the cosmology for it—I pondered those lines. We differ in our hopes for our eyes and our ears; we burn, but not uniformly; we are late, but not for the same dream; we know loss, but not the same loss. There are as many objects for tears as there are tears. We may be known by what we mourn, and do not mourn, for. It makes no sense to grieve for everything; or more accurately, the man who grieves for everything grieves really for himself.

Now leave the shul and lower the level. In the Style section of *The Washington Post* a few months ago, there appeared this supplication: "God, please stop taking away our celebrities." It is one of the exemplary American sentences of our day. It began a trend piece, the trend in this instance being celebrity death. Jackson, Cronkite, Fawcett, Carradine, Hewitt, Kennedy Shriver, McNamara, Malden, Novak, McMahon—the diligent reporter noted every sighting of the angel of death, though not a word about what it wore or where it ate. The star-struck reaper has meanwhile claimed also Swayze, Kennedy, Travers, Gelbart, Dunne, Safire, and (here I suspend all satire) my twinkling and troublemaking friend Irving Kristol, the happiest of happy warriors. Where will it end? It is our world now, and pray for us. The *Post* piece also brought me news of CelebrityDeathBeeper.com, to which I immediately repaired. "We won't quit until they're all dead," the site says. (Also: "Why? Kathy Lee Gifford, that's why.") The Internet never stops breaking new ground in insensitivity, but an idea may sometimes be found in the derision. So what sort of sorrow is sorrow for a celebrity? Consider the death of Walter Cronkite. He was an institution of American life, no question about it. His stability was a boon in an era of instability. He represented a belief in objectivity that our culture abandoned a long time ago. The media exequies for Cronkite were no surprise, of course: there is no undertaker like television, and he was its own. But how much of a nation's sadness, I wonder, was a generation's sadness—a commemoration by other means of the circumstances of its youth? Cronkite was one of those circumstances. Mourning for him was like mourning for vinyl, or pay phones, or the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*. It was another reminder of how much that was ours, and was good, has fled. ("Mad Men" owes some of its success to the warmth of its pastness, to the feeling of respite from change, of fastidious restoration, that it provides.)

Do not mock this melancholy. It is generational not only in the sense that it is experienced by people of a certain age, but also in the sense that it is as inexorable as the years. Nobody will escape it. One day you will look up emptily from the everythingPod in your hand and want your Death Cab for Cutie days back.

Celebrities are not people, except for themselves, and maybe not even for themselves. They are products; artificially enhanced markers of this moment and then the next; mnemonic devices for obscure existences that measure themselves out in mass-market references, in the increasingly transient iconographies of the entertainment environment. At this late date in the critical theory of celebrity (which is itself a variety of the virus) there may be little to add, except to repeat that a vicarious life is an alienated life, even if alienation is mistaken for participation. The Style section was theologically in error. God does not recognize celebrity. In paradise every name is boldfaced. As for the death of Michael Jackson, the whole tabloid humanoid circus, with its vultures and its vampires, and its stupid rabbi: I was more moved by the death of Balthazar. Balthazar was a donkey in a shattering film by Bresson. He loved, and served, and suffered, and went out into a meadow to die. Balthazar's death was as real as Michael Jackson's death was unreal. Nobody who saw the donkey die will forget its wisdom. Nobody who saw Michael Jackson die will forget Anderson Cooper.

Last month a man named Francis Mason died. I did not know him, though we exchanged letters some years ago. For many years he edited *Ballet Review*, a small and magnificent journal that was an education for me. It masterfully combined scholarship, criticism, interviews, photographs, all of it held together with staples and available, but not frequently enough, at the Ballet Shop on Broadway and 63rd Street, whose proprietor died last month. (I can hear you laughing.) We now live in a world in which such a journal and such a shop are almost inconceivable. Sure, we have apps. But I will not be texted out of my elegiac mood. The notion that we have impoverished ourselves may be unexciting, but it is true. Happy is the eye that saw all this, but our souls were anguished by what our ear heard. Or as James McMurtry sang the other night in Alexandria, "I don't want another drink. I only want that last one again."

Leon Wieseltier

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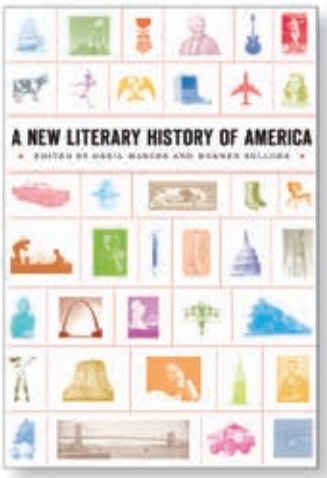

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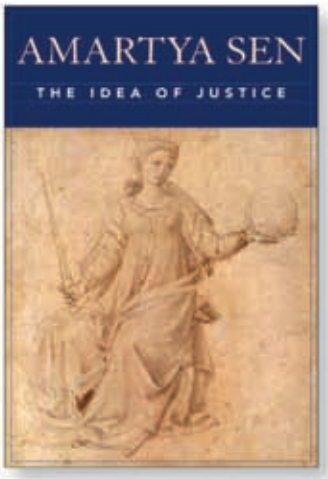

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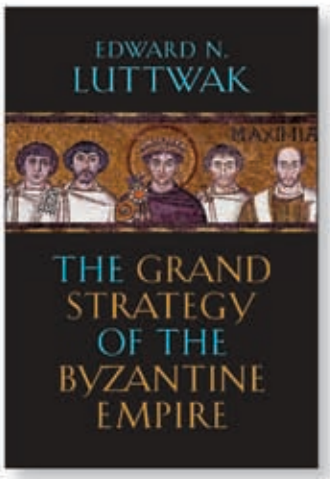

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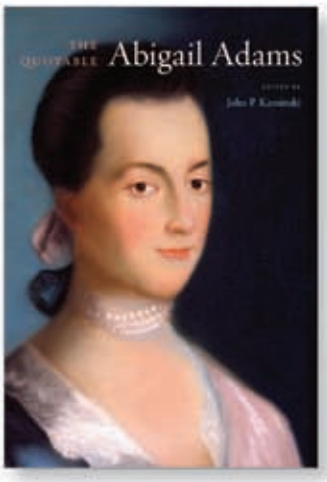

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